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# GREAT BATTLES OF WORLD WAR TWO

## Volume One: Land Battles

- Fall of France • Siege of Tobruk • Moscow
- Singapore • El Alamein • Stalingrad • Kursk
- Monte Cassino • Imphal and Kohima
- Normandy • Okinawa AND MORE...



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# WELCOME

**“** The Second World War may be fading from living memory, but discussion of this era-defining conflict shows no sign of abating.

In this special edition – published to mark 75 years since the end of the war – we bring together the work of Britain's top military historians as we explore the major land battles that shaped 1939–45.

From the **punishing heat of the Egyptian desert** to the **deep freeze of the Russian winter**, we pursue the tactics, the technology and the human stories that continue to make the war a deep source of fascination for so many.

We discuss Hitler's shocking **invasion of France in 1940**, the Allies' against-all-odds **defence of Tobruk**, the bloody struggle to **liberate the Philippines**, the **massive tank showdown at Kursk** and much more, as we highlight the soldiers who served and the military leaders whose tactical nous tilted the battles in their favour.

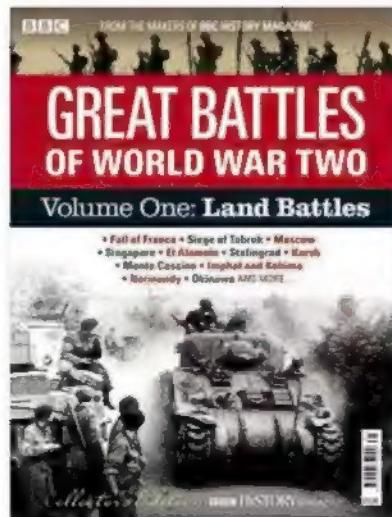
Along the way, we'll also answer some of the conflict's biggest questions. Why was **defeat at Stalingrad** so crucial to the German collapse? Was **Britain's loss of Singapore** really the utter humiliation that Churchill claimed it was? And, in the weeks that followed the vicious **battle of Okinawa**, how justified was Truman in dropping the atomic bombs on Japan?

*Great Battles of World War Two: Land Battles* is the first in a series of three special editions exploring the war separately on land, at sea and in the air. It contains newly commissioned articles along with updated versions of features that have previously appeared in *BBC History Magazine* and our sister title *BBC History Revealed*.

If you've enjoyed this edition, make sure you pick up a copy of the second volume – *War at Sea* – on sale from 21 May.

**Jon Bauckham**

Editor



**“** Hitler was setting himself up for a fall of catastrophic proportions, from which his Reich would never recover **“**

**PETER CADDICK-ADAMS** examines the failures that led to Germany's seismic defeat at the battle of Stalingrad on page 48

# CONTENTS

## 6 **Introduction**

New weaponry sets the stage for a different kind of war

## 8 **1939–42**

### 10 **The fall of France**

Hitler risked it all in his surprise assault on France in 1940 – and he caught the Allies sleeping

### 18 **Digging in at Tobruk**

How an exhausted garrison held a key Libyan port against Rommel's fearsome Afrika Korps

### 25 **Moscow or bust**

An easy win for the Wehrmacht is hampered by Red Army heroics – and the Russian mud

### 32 **Disaster in Singapore**

Britain's far eastern stronghold was thought impregnable, but Japanese ferocity and daring would topple it inside a week

### 40 **Line in the sand**

A key showdown at El Alamein transformed Britain's fortunes in the desert war. But did victory come at too high a cost?

## 46 **1942–44**

### 48 **Standoff at Stalingrad**

How a grinding defeat in one of the bloodiest battles of all time spelled the beginning of the end for the Reich

### 54 **The epic of Kursk**

Hitler tries to recoup his losses on the eastern front with an almighty tank showdown

### 60 **Climbing Monte Cassino**

Dogged German resistance holds back the Allies in a savage struggle on the Italian peninsula



### 68 **Imphal and Kohima**

Japan's strike on north-east India was meant to bring down the Raj. But it hadn't counted on fierce Allied opposition

### 75 **Masterminding Overlord**

D-Day kicked off an operation that aimed to drive all the way to Paris. But the Wehrmacht would not roll over without a fight

## 82 **1944–45**

### 84 **Hitler's last gamble**

The story of the battle of the Bulge: the desperate German counteroffensive of winter 1944

### 90 **Retaking the Philippines**

The struggle for Manila involved heroism, pain, sacrifice – and a litany of Japanese atrocities

### 96 **The race for Berlin**

Faultlines appear in the Allies' united front as they close in on the German capital

### 104 **Okinawa and the bomb**

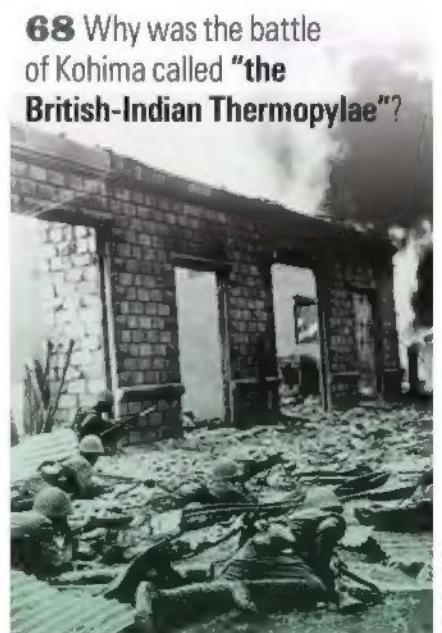
How the horrors of the fight for Okinawa persuaded Truman to press the nuclear button

### 111 **Understanding trauma**

Tremors, nausea and flashbacks – the story of 'battle stress' and its growing recognition

### 114 **Opinion**

James Holland on the complex logistics of modern warfare





**40** Defeat at El Alamein was not an option for the 8th Army. But **how would Monty's men outwit the wily Desert Fox?**



GETTY IMAGES/WWIWM (B13395)

**84** How Hitler's last strike sparked a **bitter winter war**



**111** Reckoning the Second World War's psychological cost



# THE SOUND AND THE FURY

**W**hen the Second World War started, none of the protagonists were prepared. Since the mid-1930s Hitler had planned on going to war in 1943, but if the Nazis were under-equipped in 1939, they at least had a high command that was pugnacious and progressive. Not so their adversaries.

Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery reflected in his memoirs that, by 1939, most of the senior British officers had outstayed their welcome. "They remained in office far too long, playing musical chairs with the top jobs but never taking a chair away when the music stopped," he wrote.

It was the same in France, where, according to the military theorist Basil Liddell Hart, the army's high command was "20 years out of date". An advocate of mechanised warfare between the wars, Liddell Hart was scathing in his analysis of how Britain, France and Poland had failed to understand the potential of the tank in this period.

There was the odd voice that recognised how swiftly warfare was evolving, among them a then little-known French lieutenant colonel called Charles de Gaulle, whose 1934 book *The Army of the Future* explained how mechanised infantry would change the face of modern warfare. Few in France paid any attention, preferring to put their faith in the defensive fortifications of the Maginot Line

**WAR WAS NOW  
ABOUT MORE  
THAN STRATEGY  
AND STAMINA: OF  
PRIME IMPORTANCE  
WAS ACCESS TO  
ALUMINIUM, NICKEL  
AND PETROLEUM**

(which was easily outflanked by German armour in May 1940). But in Germany, General Heinz Guderian absorbed the theories of the future French president in writing his own treatise on armoured warfare, *Achtung – Panzer!*

Guderian also grasped quicker than his enemies how tanks, used in conjunction with motorised infantry and aircraft, could revolutionise warfare, in what came to be known as *Blitzkrieg* ('lightning war'). Crucially, he saw the tank in the vanguard of an offensive and not, as the British and French did, as "servants of the infantry". Furthermore, with the advances in communication, it would also be possible for tank commanders to coordinate action through radio transmitters.

Contrary to popular belief, Germany actually had an inferior number of tanks to France in 1939, but Guderian – enthusiastically backed by Adolf Hitler – made far better use of his armour, creating six armoured, four 'light' (mechanised) and four motorised infantry divisions.



Red Army T-34 tanks in action, 1943. Skirmishes with Japan had given the Soviets valuable experience of armoured war

The Second World War would be a new kind of fight, defined by tanks, heavy artillery, aircraft and communications. Since 1918, warfare had changed – and the victors would be those who best harnessed the brutal power of technology

There were other German innovations that would take the Allies by devastating surprise when war erupted, which again exploited interwar technological advances and the short-sightedness of the nation's adversaries. Under General Kurt Student, an airborne force of 4,500 paratroopers had been formed and they proved their worth in the invasion of Holland and Belgium, capturing key bridges so that the tanks could advance without delay.

The Soviets, like Germany, had understood the importance of the tank early on, and their skirmishes with Japan in north-east Asia in the 1930s had given them valuable experience of armoured warfare, as it had the Japanese.

Writing after the war, Winston Churchill admitted that in 1940 he "did not comprehend the violence of the revolution effected since the last war by the incursion of a mass of fast-moving heavy armour".

The United States had the advantage of joining the war two years in, having seen the devastating effect of Germany's armour in

the invasion of the Low Countries and experienced the deadly power of aerial attack when the Japanese ambushed Pearl Harbor. Washington was quick to catch up, in part because, in Generals George Patton and Dwight Eisenhower, it had two senior officers who had been involved with tank training in the First World War.

Of more importance, however, in the US's readiness for total war was its size. In attacking such a vast country, Japan had made the same error as Germany in invading the Soviet Union in June 1941. For warfare was now about more than strategy and stamina: of paramount importance was access to the raw materials required for all the armour and aircraft, particularly aluminium, nickel, rubber and petroleum. Of the combatant nations, the Soviets and the US had the most natural resources at their disposal – especially the Americans, who produced two-thirds of the world's petroleum.

This military revolution reached its apogee in the summer of 1943 at Kursk

(see page 54), when for a month Russia and Germany fought a battle that involved 5,000 aircraft, 8,000 tanks and two million troops along a 150-mile front.

In describing the battle of Kursk, Liddell Hart likened it to Marshal Ferdinand Foch's general offensive on the western front in 1918, "with its alternating series of strokes at different points... each so aimed as to pave the way for the next, and all timed to react on one another".

The difference, however, between the fighting of 1918 and 1943 was one of technology. In 25 years, armour, aircraft, ordnance and methods of communication had become more powerful, speedy and sophisticated, transforming warfare and making the First World War feel like a conflict that had been fought not a quarter of a century earlier, but a century. ▀

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**Gavin Mortimer** is a historian and author. His books include *The Long Range Desert Group in World War II* (Osprey, 2017) and *The Men Who Made the SAS* (Constable, 2015)

# PART ONE 1939–1942

**/// The generals were confident that the shock and awe of their approach would disable the French and the British ///**

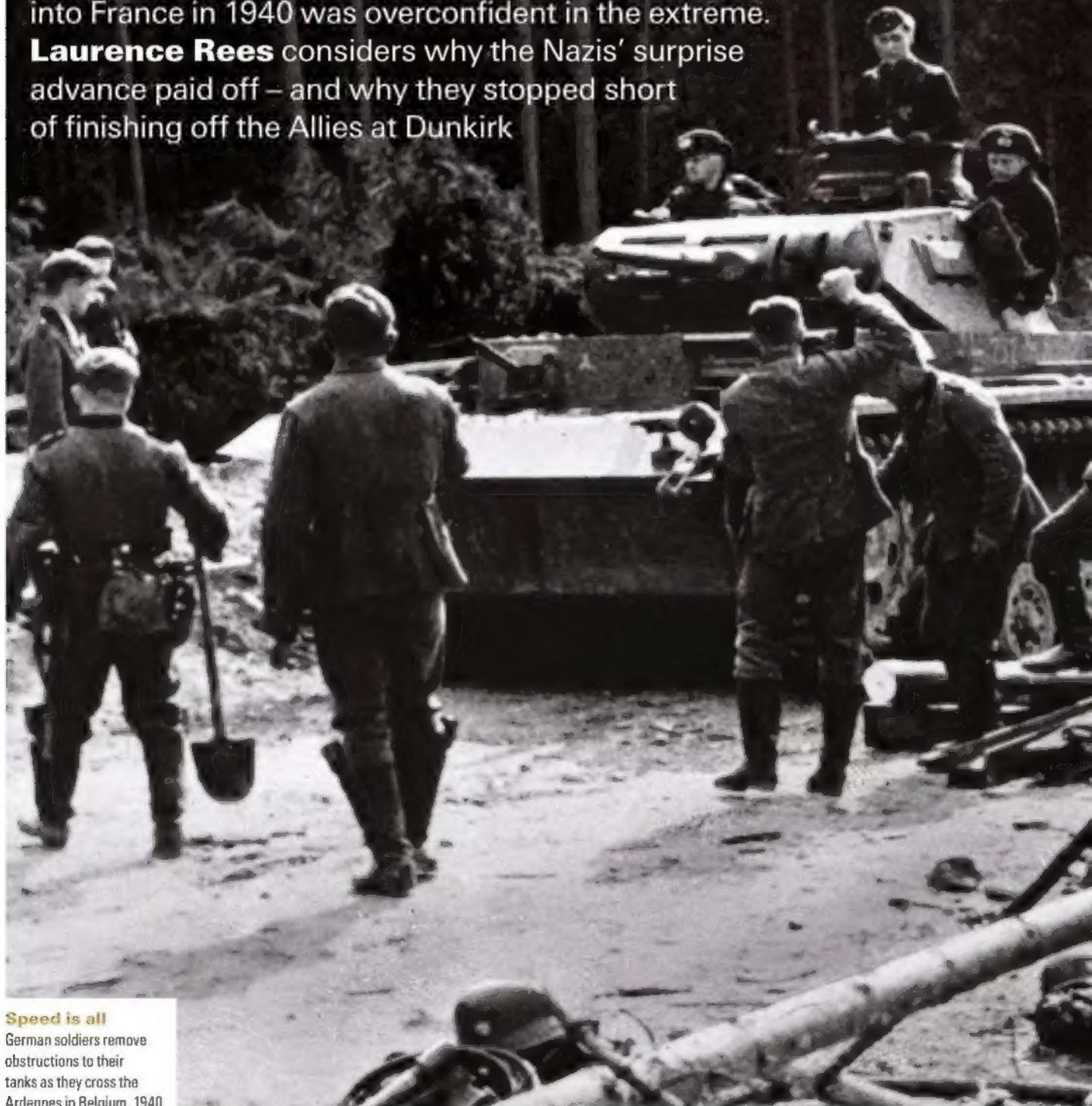


Japanese Imperial Army  
engineers hold a bridge  
for soldiers to cross during  
the march on Singapore  
in January 1942

# GOING FOR BROKE

Many cite Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union as the prime example of his hubris – but to his peers, the German drive into France in 1940 was overconfident in the extreme.

**Laurence Rees** considers why the Nazis' surprise advance paid off – and why they stopped short of finishing off the Allies at Dunkirk



#### Speed is all

German soldiers remove obstructions to their tanks as they cross the Ardennes in Belgium, 1940



**A**dolf Hitler was one of the greatest risk takers in history. As he told Hermann Göring, just before the Second World War began: "I always go for broke!" So, in a lifetime of living on the edge, what do you think was the single greatest gamble Adolf Hitler ever took?

Most people, I think, would point to the decision to invade the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 as the craziest of all Hitler's risks. Not least because it was Red Army troops who would, as a consequence, eventually enter Berlin in victory nearly four years later, after the most destructive single war ever fought. This gamble obviously went spectacularly wrong for the Germans.

But that is not how it seemed to most people at the time. Both the British and Americans thought the Germans would defeat the Soviet Union in 1941. So it's only with hindsight that we see the catastrophic error of Hitler's ways.

In fact, to contemporaries, the most ridiculously risky decision Hitler ever took was to invade western Europe and try to conquer France in the spring of 1940. "None of the higher headquarters think that the offensive has any prospect of success," wrote General Franz Halder, chief of the German General Staff, in his diary on 3 November 1939.

One of today's leading historians of the Second World War confirms that Halder was not alone in thinking Hitler was mad to contemplate invading France. "It's not for nothing that the commander of the German navy is in a thoroughly suicidal mood in the autumn of 1939," says Professor Adam Tooze of Columbia University, talking of the disquiet in the higher reaches of the German armed forces. "It's not for nothing that one of the key figures in the German army is going to his meetings with Hitler with a loaded pistol in his pocket, and but for his oath of loyalty, which ran deep in somebody whose entire family had for generations served in the German army, would have quite happily assassinated Hitler."

All of these military experts were against Hitler's decision to mount an offensive against the west, simply because they thought the Germans lacked the capacity to gain victory. As Professor Tooze says, Hitler was proposing an operation that was "phenomenally high risk" and one that could well lead to a "catastrophic defeat" for the Germans.

Not only did Allied forces possess more tanks than the Germans in the spring of 1940, the British and the French tanks were better. Generals in the French high command, in particular, were brimming with



confidence about their ability to repulse any German offensive in the spring of 1940. Indeed, the commander-in-chief of the French army promised that Hitler would "definitely" be beaten.

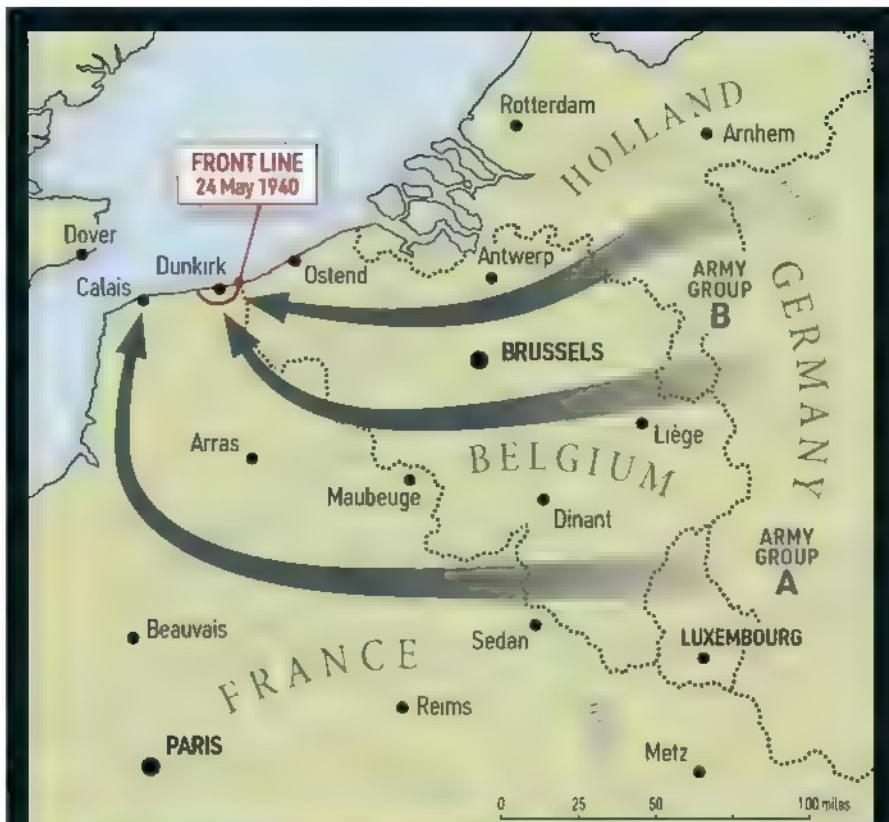
#### A spectacular plan

It's also a myth that the Germans were contemplating an offensive in May 1940 that would use revolutionary military tactics. In fact, they relied on traditions deep within the German army. "Frederick the Great, back in the 18th century, laid out Prussian tactical doctrine: the Prussian army always attacks," says Professor Rob Citino, a leading authority on German military history. "He had a standing order for his cavalry forces that they must always get their charge in first and not wait to be charged by the enemy."

"That notion of a kind of bulldog level of aggression coupled with repeated manoeuvre had been a German tradition for a good long time. I'm not sure it had ever really been a British tradition; it had arguably been a French tradition during the reign of the great

**TO CONTEMPORARIES,  
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CONQUER FRANCE IN  
THE SPRING OF 1940**

**Calculated risk** Adolf Hitler makes plans at his headquarters in Brûly-de-Pesche, Ardennes, 1940



**Bulldog aggression** Following an old Prussian military tradition of getting their charge in first, the German army stormed towards the Channel coast in May 1940



German tank forces cross a river as they sweep through Belgium, May 1940

Napoleon, but certainly not in other periods or times of French history. What [the Germans] were really trying to do [in spring 1940] was restore a very old way of war."

Nor was the original German plan to invade western Europe anything new. In fact, it was a variant on the Schlieffen plan used in the First World War – a sweeping attack through Belgium and the Netherlands towards France. And if the Germans had actually put this plan into operation, it would almost certainly have led, as it did in the First World War, to a long and bloody stalemate that would eventually have brought German defeat. But the Germans didn't go with this original idea; partly because the Allies captured a draft of the plan when a German plane crashed over Belgium in January 1940, and partly because Hitler had always been inclined – like the gambler he was – to go for something more spectacular.

That spectacular option was offered by the ambitious General Erich von Manstein (though many others would also later claim authorship of this new plan – as the old

saying goes: "Success has many fathers; failure is an orphan"). Manstein – supported by Heinz Guderian, the most brilliant tank commander of the war, and General Gerd von Rundstedt, who would command Army Group A in 1940 – suggested to Hitler that the main offensive against the west should not come through Belgium and the Low Countries, but instead further south, through the forest of the Ardennes, directly into France around Sedan. There would still be an attack through Belgium by German Army Group B, but this would be designed to make the Allies think that the Germans were mounting a conventional attack. As a consequence, the advance of Army Group A would take them by surprise.

"The panzers of Army Group A would slice through the Ardennes and then make this race west to cut off a large fraction of the French army and the entire British army and annihilate it," says Professor Geoffrey Wawro, director of the Military History Center at the University of North Texas. "But the risks were tremendous. You're talking about seven armoured divisions against this large French army and this large British army, racing to the coast, exposing a flank 300 kilometres long with no supporting infantry behind them: a tremendous risk. But the German generals, Manstein, Rundstedt and Guderian, were confident that the shock and awe of that kind of approach would so disable the French and the British that they'd win."

"This is an operation of unprecedented logistical risk," confirms Professor Adam Tooze, "and gives the opponents of Germany – Britain, France, Belgium and Holland – the chance, if they're sufficiently well organised, to mount a devastating counterattack on Germany and on the pincer moving across northern France. And for this reason the Germans fully understand that if this plan fails they've lost the war."

#### The power of deception

On 10 May, the Germans attacked. And to begin with, as the Germans had hoped, the Allies were totally deceived about the true location of the Wehrmacht's main attack. At French military headquarters one officer heard the remark: "See how the general was right to attach no importance to anything except the north-eastern front!"

The overconfidence – almost arrogance – of the Allies was one of the key reasons why they would be defeated so quickly and so comprehensively in the battle for France. Because even when reports began to come from the southern sector that there



#### "We have been defeated!"

French prime minister Paul Reynaud – pictured in grey at the French War Office in 1940 – called Churchill with a gloomy verdict

were German troop movements around the Ardennes, there was little urgency to react. Since the British and French appeared to be holding the Germans in Belgium and the Netherlands, along the northern front, what damage could a 'diversionary' attack through the rough terrain of the Ardennes do? Plenty, was the answer. In one of the most astonishing feats of modern warfare, German armoured units managed to move through the Ardennes and then cross the river Meuse in France by 13 May – within three days of the battle starting. The Allies had planned that their defensive forces in this area would gradually retreat in the face of a German attack to the line of the Meuse, and then hold at the river and wait for reinforcements. But that plan was blown to pieces.

"The Allies were absolutely unprepared," says Professor Wawro. "The irony is that Colonel JFC Fuller and Liddell Hart and other Brits during the interwar period had

## THE GERMANS ADMINISTERED A 'SHOCK TO THE BRAIN', PARALYSING AND DEMORALISING THE FRENCH AND THE BRITISH

been talking about tanks and armoured warfare, and the need to administer a 'shock to the brain' instead of getting into these attritional slugging matches from trench lines in the sort of 'French-style' methodical battle. Yet a 'shock to the brain' is exactly what the Germans administered when they broke through and cut behind the French and the British; they paralysed and demoralised them. They didn't destroy the fighting effectiveness of those units, they just completely discombobulated them."

#### Shattered and defeated

When, on 14 May, Sedan fell to the Germans, the French political leadership were certainly discombobulated. In the early hours of 15 May, Paul Reynaud, the French prime minister, rang Winston Churchill, who had been prime minister for less than a week. Reynaud opened the conversation with the words: "We have been defeated!"

And the spirit of many of the generals commanding the French army was just as shattered. Captain André Beaufre wrote: "I must confess that the morale of the French high command was very quickly broken. In fact, the night when we happened to know that the front had been broken through at Sedan, at that time the feeling was that everything was lost. I saw General Georges, who was commanding the north-eastern front... sobbing and saying: 'There have been some deficiencies.'"

German Army Group A now dashed towards the French coast, reaching the mouth of the river Somme on the English Channel by 20 May. The main British and French fighting force was now trapped north of them, between the twin spearheads of Army Group B and Army Group A. The British, as a consequence, had no alternative but to fall back to the French coast themselves – at Dunkirk.

But then something very strange happened – something that has been debated ever since. On 24 May, the Germans decided to halt their advance and not move forward to crush the Allied troops in Dunkirk. Various theories have been advanced as to why this delay was agreed. Was Hitler deliberately allowing the British to escape because he wanted to make peace with Great Britain? Or were the German troops simply exhausted? What exactly happened in that vital meeting on 24 May, attended by Adolf Hitler and the German commander, General Gerd von Rundstedt?

Professor Sir Ian Kershaw has made a careful study of that decisive conference, and he is in no doubt about the reason for the halt order: "What Hitler was doing there on the



#### Shock and awe

German panzers break through at Sedan, May 1940. Defeat shattered the morale of the French high command; General Georges, seasoned commander of the north-eastern front, burst into tears.



#### Irresistible force

German infantrymen pass through a village during the offensive on France, May 1940.

## 1940 The fall of France



**One horse town**  
Military equipment left behind  
by the evacuated British and  
French forces, circa 6 June 1940

**Awaiting rescue** British troops form long winding lines at Dunkirk, waiting to board small boats for transport back home



**Under attack** British soldiers fight a rearguard action during the evacuation, firing at attacking aircraft as bombs explode in the sea



## THE OVERCONFIDENCE OF THE ALLIES WAS ONE OF THE KEY REASONS WHY THEY WOULD BE DEFEATED SO QUICKLY IN THE BATTLE FOR FRANCE

### Narrow escape

Allied troops look back at the French coast as they are evacuated June 1940

24 May 1940, that crucial day, was actually agreeing to the suggestion put forward by the commander of the German forces in the west, General von Rundstedt, who wanted to preserve the tanks for what they saw as a greater need, which was to destroy the French troops by moving south against them. And Göring had promised Hitler that the British troops would be bombed to bits from the air anyway.

For the soldiers of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) who had retreated to Dunkirk, this delay was a godsend. It meant that they had time to prepare the defence of the town, and the British navy had time to organise an evacuation. And though Luftwaffe planes did indeed bomb Dunkirk, they didn't manage to destroy the armies sheltering there. So as a result, at dawn on 27 May, the halt order was reversed and the German army began to advance.

As the Germans attacked, several hundred thousand Allied troops still waited patiently on the beaches around Dunkirk to be rescued. "It was just queues," says Edward Oates, one of the British soldiers who was trapped at Dunkirk. "queues of men... and people going out into the water. And, of course, the Germans kept coming over - planes. We had to keep dashing up to the dunes to stop being hit."

More than 800 civilian vessels – fishing boats, pleasure steamers, tugs – arrived to help ferry the troops across the Channel to England. But contrary to later myth, the majority of soldiers were rescued not from the beaches, but from inside Dunkirk's port – taken on board larger ships, moored to the quayside. In all, more than 330,000 Allied soldiers were rescued from Dunkirk. The British government had initially thought little more than 40,000 could be saved. But a combination of the German halt order and the good fortune of relative calm in the Channel had made what Churchill called this "miracle of deliverance" possible.

### Extraordinary achievement

Despite the successful evacuation at Dunkirk, there was no denying that the Germans had won an astonishing victory. One made all the more memorable because it had been won without superior weaponry, but rather, as Professor Adam Tooze puts it, by the "uncanny elan of the German troops, who displayed truly remarkable fighting capacity in that offensive: the extraordinary marching achievements by the infantry, continuous fighting over days and days and days, essentially without sleep". But it was also a victory, as he reminds us, which had only been made possible by "the incapacity of the

British and the French military leaderships to respond with the necessary speed to the German offensive."

Indeed, once the Germans saw what the British had left behind, they could scarcely believe that victory against such a modern army had been possible. Professor Tooze says. "They're completely overwhelmed by the extraordinary depth of British motorisation and the number of trucks the British have just abandoned by the side of the road."

"All their vehicles have been left on the beach," adds Professor Wawro. "Most of their field artillery, anti-tank guns, ammunition, fuel stocks – all have been left to the Germans. So it's going to take an awfully long time to build them up, and in fact you're going to see old, antiquated vehicles running around in the western desert because the good stuff was all left behind at Dunkirk."

And though more than 330,000 soldiers had been saved, there were many British who did not come home in 1940. Around 68,000 of the BEF were killed, wounded or taken prisoner. Hitler and the German army had routed the British and conquered France. "In some sense, for that brief moment, they found themselves with a kind of tactical battlefield superiority to the British and French," says Professor Rob Citino. "Now, that did not lead to a happy ending. It led to a reasonably happy ending in 1940. But a sense of tactical and operational superiority just leads you on to more and more campaigns."

And Hitler's next major campaign would be the one that would break him. Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union. The offensive that many still think – incorrectly – was his biggest gamble of all. ■

Laurence Rees is a historian, author and filmmaker. His latest book, *Hilter and Stalin: The Tyrants and the Second World War*, will be published by Viking in October 2020



# TOBRUK SURVIVING THE SIEGE



#### Setting their sights

Allied troops in charge of a coastal defence gun enjoy a game of darts while they wait for their next orders

When a motley garrison of Allied troops was penned in by Rommel's undefeated Deutsches Afrika Korps, the result should have been a foregone conclusion, reveals

**Robert Lyman**

Lieutenant Philip Brownless, a 21-year-old officer in the 1st Battalion, Essex Regiment, stood on the deck of HMS *Havock* as it raced through the darkness off the north African coast, his eyes searching the murky gloom ahead. Suddenly, far in the distance, he could see flashes lighting up the horizon. They were from anti-aircraft guns, mixed with explosions from bombs dropped from Italian Savoia 79 planes flying out of the Libyan province of Tripolitania, and German Heinkels coming in from Crete. Along the coast, searchlights stabbed into the night, occasionally picking out a bomber at high altitude, while the weaving aircraft sought to escape the beam.

It was mid-October 1941. Tobruk was in the grip of one of the longest sieges in the history of the British empire, the men of 1st Essex (of the British 70th Division) being shipped in as part of an operation to provide relief to the Australian 9th Division, which had held the perimeter against the German and Italian forces of Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel (the 'Desert Fox') since early April. The siege was eventually to run for 242 days. Its survival against the determined onslaught of Rommel's troops was a staggering achievement, with significant strategic consequences for Great Britain and the course of the Second World War.

In March 1941, Rommel's Deutsches Afrika Korps, together with two Italian corps, struck out against Egypt in an audacious race for the Nile and the greatest prize that the Middle East could offer: the Suez Canal. The British and Australian troops who had only weeks before pushed the Italians out of eastern Libya ('Cyrenaica') had now themselves been sorely depleted by the requirement to reinforce Greece.

The German advance, far sooner and more brilliantly conducted than anyone in

Cairo or London had expected, threatened to cut the British empire in half. Rommel's attack would have been strategically decisive – nothing defended Egypt at the time – were it not for one factor: Tobruk. Drawing a perimeter around them, those few British and Australian troops who could scurry back to the relative safety of the port prepared to defend themselves against the weight of the German blitzkrieg.

Archibald Wavell, the Middle Eastern commander-in-chief, wanted to withdraw his troops from Tobruk in a Dunkirk-style evacuation. He did not want the problem of having to sustain a garrison far behind enemy lines. But Winston Churchill ordered him to defend the port. The prime minister concluded that Tobruk could act as a sore on Rommel's left flank as he attempted to advance on the Nile. The lack of a port would also hinder Rommel's ability to supply his forces as they drove into Egypt.

Churchill was to be proved right, but at the outset it seemed impossible that Rommel would not succeed. This assumption ignored the extraordinary tenacity of a weak, ill-equipped and inexperienced mixed British and Australian force that stubbornly refused to surrender to the German advance. Tobruk's garrison included the newly formed Australian 9th Infantry Division, together with a British machine-gun battalion, tanks, artillery, and anti-tank and anti-aircraft troops. By June, the forces in Tobruk numbered 24,000, about 10,000 of whom were British. Try as Rommel might – infantry, tanks, waves of Stuka dive-bombers, U-boats and heavy artillery – he entirely failed to eject first the Australians and, when they had been relieved between August and September, the British 70th Division and the Carpathian Brigade of the Free Polish Army. At Tobruk in 1941, Rommel had the dubious honour of

### Bully for you

Allied troops struggled with the diet of bully and biscuit as the siege lingered



## THOSE FEW BRITISH AND AUSTRALIAN TROOPS THAT COULD SCURRY BACK TO THE PORT PREPARED TO DEFEND THEMSELVES

presiding over the first major German defeat in the Second World War.

Life for the defenders was tough. They were armed with an eclectic mix of weapons and equipment, much salvaged from the Italians. Of the garrison's 113 anti-tank guns, half were Italian. Infantry battalions were so sited that two or three companies were placed in the forward positions, with a reserve company half a mile to the rear for counterattack tasks. The Australians were eager to live up to the fighting reputation of their fathers in the First World War. Reacting to

a newspaper report that "Tobruk can take it", the Australian divisional commander, Major General Leslie Morshead, retorted: "We're not here to take it. We're here to give it!"

In April and May 1941, Rommel launched attacks with tanks. The Australians in the front line had no anti-tank weapons, but the garrison boasted a mixture of about 30 tanks formed into mobile response units designed to counterattack any breakthrough by the panzers. Each time they penetrated, the defenders beat them back. After one failed attack, a German prisoner reflected on the stand the defenders had taken: "In

Poland, France and Belgium, once the tanks got through, the soldiers took it for granted that they were beaten. But you were like demons. The tanks break through and your infantry still keep fighting."

Rommel also enjoyed overwhelming superiority in the air. An attack took place on every single day of the siege. The most feared weapon was the Stuka dive-bomber. Gunner Leonard Tutt described coming under attack: "They were stub-winged, almost ungainly in appearance. They looked rather slow-moving in flight until they went into their dive. They came down like a stone, holding their course until it appeared that they were going to dash themselves to pieces on their target. Then they would pull out of it with such suddenness that you felt their wings would be torn away. Under attack, one seemed to have been chosen as their sole target. You could see the bombs leave their racks, wobble hesitantly then straighten up as they gained the velocity."

In turn, Wavell mounted attacks from Egypt designed to push Rommel back, and relieve Tobruk – Operation Brevity in May and Operation Battleaxe in June – but both failed to break the German stranglehold, at great cost in men and equipment.

## TIMELINE How Rommel was outfoxed at Tobruk

### October 1940

An Italian force under the command of Lieutenant General Graziani invades Egypt, but stops short of Mersa Matruh.

### Early December

The British counter-attack and sweep the Italians from Cyrenaica. Bardia and Tobruk are captured, and the Italians surrender at Beda Fomm.

### 12 February 1941

The Germans arrive in north Africa and Rommel immediately counterattacks. Tobruk is cut off by 10 April.

### 10–14 April

Rommel's first panzer assault penetrates the Red Line perimeter defences around Tobruk, but is thrown back by Australian infantry, British artillery and tanks.

### 30 April

Rommel's second fierce assault secures a small indentation in the Red Line at Point 209 but makes no further headway. Tobruk remains safe.

### Helping the injured

A group of Allied soldiers tend to their wounded following an exchange with Rommel's forces. Troops on the ground were under constant threat from air attacks

SHUTTERSTOCK/KAFETY IMAGES/MARY EVANS



### Winged warriors

A German Stuka dive-bomber is escorted by an ME 109 fighter



**In the thick of it**  
A Nazi propaganda image shows a German armoured vehicle at the front line

### 15 May

**Operation Brevity** is launched from Egypt, but grinds to a halt after a day as British tanks are unable to penetrate German and Italian positions.

### 15 June

**Operation Battleaxe** is launched, but likewise runs into the sand by 17 June. Again, the British make no headway against German anti-tank ambushes.

### August, September, October

Between 21–30 August, 17–27 September and 13–25 October, the Australian 9th Division is replaced in Tobruk by the British 70th Division.

### 21 November

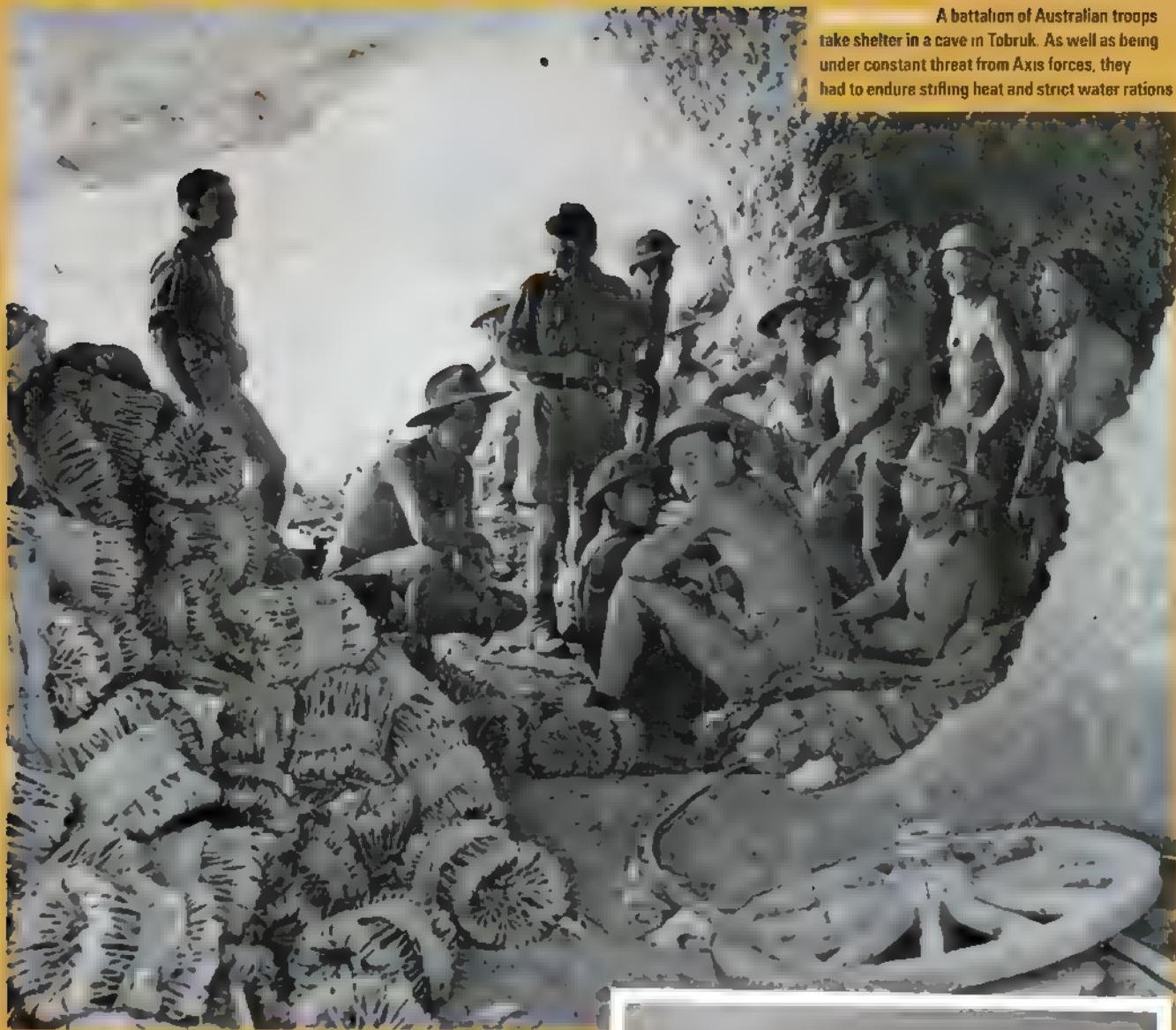
The Tobruk garrison breaks out, in conjunction with the 8th Army's offensive, and manages to secure German positions.

### 6 December

After three weeks of fierce fighting against both the 8th Army and the defenders of Tobruk, Rommel begins to retreat.

## The siege of Tobruk

A battalion of Australian troops take shelter in a cave in Tobruk. As well as being under constant threat from Axis forces, they had to endure stifling heat and strict water rations



An Allied soldier takes a rest in a shallow foxhole



A group of Scottish AA gunners catch 40 winks in beds they have captured from Italian forces. A sergeant would typically blow a whistle to wake his men up if enemies were approaching



#### Forming a strategy

Rommel, who became widely known as the 'Desert Fox', pores over battle plans with an Italian commander

A distinctive feature of the fighting was that the defenders fought not one but a series of separate battles. Along the perimeter, the infantry defended their trenches and strong points, dominating the area outside the wire by aggressive patrolling. Further back, the tanks and guns supported this battle, although by July the limited supplies of fuel prevented anything other than the allocation of emergency counterattack tasks by the tanks. At sea, both the Royal Navy and Royal Australian Navy ran the nightly gauntlet of submarine and Stuka to bring in supplies and reinforcements, and to remove the wounded, prisoners of war and those considered unnecessary to the continuation of the defence. Around the harbour and along the coast, men of the anti-aircraft batteries faced their own daily battles to survive the relentless fury of the Axis aerial assault, and to defeat it.

The battle entailed not only a struggle between the two protagonists, but one of survival in the harsh environment presented by rocky desert, baking sun and limited water. The first, for those unable to enjoy the doubtful pleasures of Italian-built strong point, underground bunker or cave, was to try to survive on the hostile rocky crust of Tobruk's wide desert. This was primarily a problem for the men of the field and anti-aircraft artillery batteries, who were forced to dig shelters as best they could, close to their guns, wherever they found themselves. In these dugouts, the men were confronted with both rats and fleas. Captain John Devine recalled one night: "I retired to bed

early on my first night and started a losing fight against the rats. They fought and chased each other all around so much that they shook the dugout. And when flashes of anti-aircraft fire, searchlight beams and the sheet lightning of bomb explosions showed that Tobruk was being stormed, the rats were making such a row that I could not hear the bombs."

The fleas, meanwhile, were ubiquitous and resilient to most known forms of eradication. Army-issue insecticides and kerosene did nothing to remove them, and they were a pestilence to both friend and foe. Likewise, it was no surprise to anyone in Tobruk that flies had constituted one of the 10 plagues of Egypt. There seemed to be millions of them. Appearing from nowhere, they went for sources of moisture, especially the eyes, nostrils and mouth, spoon, mess tin

**THE SIEGE NEVER  
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THAN ANOTHER**

and mug. The intense desert heat, combined with the constant attention of millions of flies, caused great strain, with a few men succumbing to cafard, or desert madness. One Northumberland Fusilier even tried to shoot the flies with his revolver.

From April through to September, the heat from the sun was intense, and while most men browned evenly, others were tortured by sunburn. It was an offence not to wear a shirt and to suffer sunburn, but most men ignored these instructions and turned a golden brown. Along the coast, a refreshing zephyr off the sea countered the effects of the heat, although the benefit of the breeze was not felt when one went underground or into a slit trench, where the heat could still be stifling.

The disturbance to the desert floor due to the movement of thousands of troops, hundreds of vehicles and relentless bombing increased the number and intensity of the local dust storms, which raged over the summer months. Thirst was compounded by the dust, a gritty all-pervasive substance that swirled in the air, gathering into every cranny, particularly the working parts of rifles and machine guns. Regular cleaning with a lightly oiled rag became an almost religious ritual: a single jammed round at a crucial moment could mean the difference between life and death. The local dust storms could be just as dangerous and disorientating as the massive khamsin that swept over the desert: mighty mountains of sand whipped into a storm that could travel faster than a truck and strip paint from vehicles.

#### Physical integrity

While Rommel's pressure throughout April and May was concentrated on the physical integrity of the perimeter, from June it was focused on attempts to starve the garrison into submission through an aerial campaign of unprecedented fury, supported by the attempts of German and Italian submarines to sever the sea lifeline to Alexandria by the ships of Admiral Cunningham's 'Scrap Iron Flotilla': this meant that the siege never witnessed an entirely quiet day, nor was one area more or less dangerous than another, although the fighting took different forms from area to area.

An ex-French artillery piece in Bardia – nicknamed 'Bardia Bill' by the troops – had long been trained on the dockside areas of the harbour, lobbing 159mm shells into the port. "High level bombing became so commonplace, both by day and by night," recalled Bombardier Ray Ellis, "as to pass almost unnoticed unless the bombs were falling close by." In this arena, the most precious commodity, apart from shade,



SHUTTERSTOCK

**The march goes on**  
Despite enduring months of horrific conditions, the Allies fought their way out of the Axis encirclement

was water. The ration for each 24-hour period was a mere pint-and-a-half of water, for drinking, shaving and washing. Everyone was constantly thirsty, hungry and dirty. Lips were swollen, split and bleeding through lack of moisture.

As the months went by, food became a considerable problem for both sides – not so much, perhaps, because of its scarcity, but because its monotony had a direct impact on morale. The men both inside and outside the perimeter talked about the subject endlessly. By mid-summer 1941, the problem for the inhabitants of Tobruk was that the staple of their existence was tinned corned beef ('bully') and hard, thick Army biscuits, which the men swore had not changed since they had been inflicted on the men of Nelson's navy.

Resisting Rommel's attacks so brilliantly was only part of the achievement of the Tobruk garrison in 1941. Its greatest triumph was that they were not relieved. Instead, they fought their way out of Axis encirclement in a series of desperate battles in November and early December 1941, joining up with the 8th Army advancing from Egypt. For three weeks, the garrison, made up mainly of infantrymen of the

## A HANDFUL OF DUSTY ALLIED SOLDIERS HAD PREVENTED ROMMEL ACHIEVING HIS DESIRE, SMASHING THE MYTH OF GERMAN INVINCIBILITY

British 70th Division, fought desperate, hand-to-hand battles with German infantry and panzer forces.

The end came quickly, with Rommel withdrawing his forces from Cyrenaica, although he would be back again in 1942. The defence of Tobruk had begun with inexperienced Australian citizen-soldiers, supported by British artillerymen and tanks swept together from the chaos of retreat, determinedly manning the Italian-built perimeter posts against an arrogant enemy never before defeated in

battle. In an extraordinary way, these heterogeneous forces melded together quickly and completely, to withstand and repel everything that an increasingly frustrated German and Italian High Command could throw at them. They withstood the enemy in the skies and on land, and survived the physical deprivations of a hot summer with little water, poor food and the constant irritation of rats, flies and fleas.

In this adversity they triumphed. They knew it, too. They knew that unless Rommel could secure Tobruk, he would be unable to advance with confidence into Egypt, and they were determined to prevent him achieving this goal. The triumph of the siege of Tobruk in 1941 was that a handful of dusty Australians, Britons, Indians, Poles and Czechs had prevented Rommel from achieving his greatest desire, and constantly thwarted his efforts to master the entirety of the north African shore. In so doing, they also smashed the master-race myth of German invincibility. ■

**Robert Lyman** is a military historian whose books include *The Longest Siege: Tobruk – The Battle That Saved North Africa* (Macmillan, 2009)

# MOSCOW OR BUST

The Germans predicted a swift victory, but as their troops got stuck in the Russian mud, Red Army recruits were massing in the east. **Evan Mawdsley** tells the story of the battle of Moscow



**Stiff resistance**

Soviet infantrymen charge in a counteroffensive during the battle of Moscow, 1941

t was meant to be a 'decisive' battle. The plan of Operation Typhoon, launched at the very end of September 1941, anticipated that the crippled remains of the Red Army would have to defend the western approaches to Moscow, and there it would be smashed. The Barbarossa campaign had begun when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941; this defeat before Moscow would bring the war in the east to a triumphant close.

The essence of Germany's Barbarossa plan had been to conduct a war of movement. The original intention had been for full-scale fighting in the Soviet Union to last only a couple of months. Under the overall command of Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch, three army groups would advance to the line of the Daugava and Dnieper rivers, 350 miles into Soviet territory, and still about 300 miles west of Moscow. The Red Army was expected to be concentrated in these western borderlands, there it was to be crushed. Stunning successes were indeed achieved in June and July, but the Soviets were able to deploy reserves of troops and equipment in a second line of defence. And there was no political collapse. At the end of July, Hitler had to make decisions about a deeper advance, beyond the Daugava-Dnieper line. Brauchitsch and his senior generals preferred to drive directly towards Moscow with Army Group Centre. Against their advice, the Führer used his panzer forces against Kiev in the south and Leningrad in the north.

On 6 September, with Kiev looking set to fall into German hands and the siege of Leningrad about to commence, Hitler finally gave in to his generals. He agreed to concentrate forces for a direct strike towards Moscow. Three weeks would be required to assemble forces within Field Marshal Fedor von Bock's Army Group Centre. The operation was given the codename Typhoon. The target was the main body of Red Army troops positioned on a north-south line about 150 miles from Moscow, roughly between the towns of Vyazma and Bryansk. The Germans knew this force as 'Heeresgruppe [Army Group] Timoshenko', after the Soviet marshal who had commanded these forces for several months. The Typhoon directive stressed that speed was still essential: "The army group must be defeated and annihilated in the limited time which remains before the winter weather breaks." (In fact, Marshal Timoshenko had recently been transferred to Ukraine, and the forces under attack

## "THE ARMY GROUP MUST BE DEFEATED AND ANNIHILATED IN THE LIMITED TIME WHICH REMAINS BEFORE THE WINTER WEATHER BREAKS"

were actually three army groups, of which the most important was the Western Army Group of General Ivan Konev.)

The battle of Moscow was a long one, lasting four months and falling into several phases. The first phase, which began on 30 September, was later known by the Soviets as the battle of Vyazma-Bryansk. They were caught by surprise, and the order to pull back to avoid encirclement came too late. Some 64 rifle divisions (out of 95) and 11 tank brigades (out of 13) were caught behind the pincers of three panzer groups. A million Soviet soldiers were lost; around 600,000 of them became prisoners of war.

With this success, Typhoon seemed to have achieved its objective. At a news conference on 9 October, Reich press chief Otto Dietrich actually declared that victory had been attained: "The campaign in the east has been decided by the smashing of Heeresgruppe Timoshenko." The *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi party newspaper, carried a banner headline: "The great hour has arrived: the campaign in the east has been decided!" Early on 8 October, General Georgy Zhukov, Konev's replacement as commander of the Western Army Group, described the situation over the telephone to Stalin. "The main danger now is that nearly all routes to Moscow are open," he said. "The weak covering forces on the Mozhaysk Line cannot be a guarantee against the sudden appearance of enemy tank forces in front of Moscow." The city of Tver (then known as Kalinin), which lay only 101 miles north-west of the capital, fell on 14 October. The next day, Stalin ordered the evacuation of government institutions from Moscow.

Against expectations, however, the Germans were not able to follow their victory with a continued drive on Moscow. The enemy forces surrounded at Vyazma and Bryansk had to be dealt with. The Wehrmacht's transport system was already overstretched. Especially telling was the onset of the season of autumn mud and rain, known as the *rasputitsa*, which made rapid movement impossible. All the same, Hitler remained confident. In a speech to the Nazi party's old guard in Munich on 8 November, he announced that the Red Army had lost 8–10 million soldiers in the war so far: "No army in the world can recover from this – not even the Russian one."

### A life-or-death decision

It was not until 15 November, a month after the victory at Vyazma-Bryansk, that the second phase of the battle of Moscow began. The worst of the *rasputitsa* was over; the weather was getting colder, but the

**Dogged defenders**  
Soviet commanders  
Marshal Semyon  
Timoshenko (left) and  
General Georgy Zhukov



### The first phase

German soldiers wait to advance at the battle of Vyazma-Bryansk in October 1941



### Ready for action

Red Army mechanised infantry departs for the Moscow frontline in 1941



## 1941 The battle of Moscow



**Caught by surprise** Around 600,000 Soviet prisoners of war were captured at the battle of Vyazma-Bryansk



**Race against time** Russia's rainy season, known as the rasputitsa, made rapid movement impossible

German Field Marshal Fedor von Bock requested a halt to the attack on Moscow

**Rush hour**  
German troops pass Soviet anti-tank defences as they push east in 1941



The last phase of Operation Typhoon, 1941



of his men and the lack of reserves. He even suggested pulling back a short distance to a readily defensible position. Halder insisted, however, that the Russians had exhausted their reinforcements. "The expenditure of strength worries us too," he admitted. "But one must summon one's last strength to bring the enemy down." Some progress continued to be made. On 30 November, elements of a panzer division reached Krasnaya Polyana, only 20 miles north of the Kremlin. In his war diary on 2 December, Halder noted: "Enemy's defence has reached its height. No new [Soviet] forces."

The strength of the Red Army was a key issue. Especially important, in reality, was the Soviets' ability to mobilise reserves in quantities much larger than the Germans expected. In some respects, August had been a crucial period for the future battle of Moscow, because it was then that new divisions and brigades began to be formed deep in central Russia. Also important were fresh divisions moved from Siberia, although they would make up only 15–20 per cent of the force defending Moscow.

After 15 November, Stalin had to decide on a response to the renewed German offensive. Zhukov believed that the Germans were overstretched, Moscow could be held, and a counterattack mounted – provided he was given reinforcements. According to Zhukov, Stalin asked him: "Are you sure that we can hold Moscow? I ask you with pain in my soul. Speak honestly, like a Communist." After Zhukov's guarantees, Stalin agreed to release a number of the reserve divisions that were being assembled east of Moscow. It was a life-or-death decision: if Moscow did fall, there would be no backstop. On 29 November, assuring Stalin that the Germans were exhausted, Zhukov asked for and received permission to take action. Two newly deployed armies were transferred to him.

The culmination of the battle of Moscow came in the first week of December, as counterattacks by the Soviet forces – mainly by Zhukov's Western Army Group – intensified. Conventional accounts, both official and historical, usually depict 6 December as the moment of truth, but this is too precise. That Saturday was little different from the days just before and after it. There was no carefully calculated sudden strike, as occurred at Stalingrad 11 months later. An attack scheduled for 3 December was postponed. The first move by Red troops was actually made north west of Moscow on the 5th, by the Kalinin Army Group. But day by day, the increasing pressure of Zhukov's forces drove the Germans back.

It was certainly some time before the Soviet leadership was confident that the tide

ground began to harden. A top-level meeting of Wehrmacht leaders overseen by General Franz Halder, chief of the German General Staff, had been held just behind the front. Despite the misgivings of some generals, Halder's plan for a further attack prevailed; he was supported by Field Marshal von Bock. The aim now was to envelop Moscow. Pincer columns – the three panzer groups – would advance north and south of the city. Yet two weeks of battle did not bring any major German successes. Von Bock was now requesting a halt, in view of the exhaustion

**"ARE YOU SURE WE CAN HOLD MOSCOW?"  
STALIN PLEADED WITH ZHUKOV.  
"I ASK YOU WITH PAIN IN MY SOUL. SPEAK HONESTLY, LIKE A COMMUNIST"**

**End of the road**

Equipment abandoned by the Germans in the snowy forests outside Moscow



had turned. Only on the 12th was Moscow finally prepared to announce the fate of the northern and southern wings of the German attack. "As a result of the counteroffensive that has begun, both these forces have been defeated and they are rapidly withdrawing, abandoning equipment and weapons, and suffering huge losses." A photograph of General Zhukov appeared on the front page of *Pravda*, the Communist party newspaper, the following day. The Germans were certainly not ready to publicly admit the crisis. On 10 December, Hitler had made a major speech in which he did not refer to setbacks; heavy fighting was not reported in the German media. But in reality the front-line generals, and their men falling back across the frozen battlefield, were aware of how desperate the position of Army Group Centre had become.

**Damage limitation**

The battle of Moscow did not end in the first week of December. The final phase involved a drawn-out dogfight in the forests

**Read all about it**  
Zhukov was declared a hero as the Communist paper *Pravda* celebrated victory



west of the Soviet capital. The leaders on both sides had in mind Napoleon's experience in 1812, when the retreat from Moscow broke the back of the Grande Armée and led to the eventual defeat of France. It remained to be seen how grievous the Germans' defeat would be. The freezing weather made their position more difficult; retreat could easily turn into a rout. At the beginning of December, Stalin had despaired of holding his capital, two weeks later, on the 13th, he ordered his senior generals to "trap the enemy... give the Germans a chance to surrender and promise to spare their lives, and if they do not, destroy them to the last man". On the previous day, General Halder had put the situation in the gravest terms: "It is clear to me that this is the most dangerous situation of the two world wars."

The German army survived. Movement in winter conditions was difficult for both sides, while the new divisions of the Red Army had little training and limited equipment. Hitler played a role, taking direct command of the army. "Large retreats

### **Standing tall**

Anti-aircraft guns defend  
Moscow. In the rear rises  
Vera Mukhina's iconic Soviet  
statue of two labourers



cannot be carried out," he announced in his famous order of 18 December. "The troops are to be compelled to put up fanatical resistance in the positions they occupy, without being distracted by enemy breakthroughs on the flanks or in the rear." The Germans were indeed able to hold key roads and railways. In mid-February, Hitler could truthfully tell his army-group commanders that "the danger of a panic in the 1812 sense" had been "eliminated". The Red Army continued to attack on a broad front in February, March and April 1942, but took heavy losses for few gains.

#### **German hopes dashed**

The battle of Moscow was in the end decisive, but not in the way Hitler and his generals had expected in September – and not in the way that Stalin and Zhukov had hoped for after the first week of December. At an operational level, the battle of Moscow was not nearly as bad for the Wehrmacht as the battle of Stalingrad. After the Moscow setback, the Germans had to pull back roughly to the line, still deep in Russia,

where they had been deployed in early October. Despite Stalin's bloody order, no major German formations were captured, let alone destroyed. However, the Germans would never get deeper into central Russia than they did in December 1941. When Hitler attacked again, in May 1942 in southern Russia, he had new objectives: not the complete overthrow of Soviet power in a single blow but rather the seizure of vital resources in the Caucasus.

The blitzkrieg was over. The battle of Moscow had ended the 'war of movement' in the northern and central parts of the front, dashing the chances of a quick German victory. The Third Reich did not have the manpower, or resources, to a fight the 'war of attrition' in which they now found themselves mired. Such a war meant doom for the Wehrmacht – not only in Russia, but in all of Europe. ■

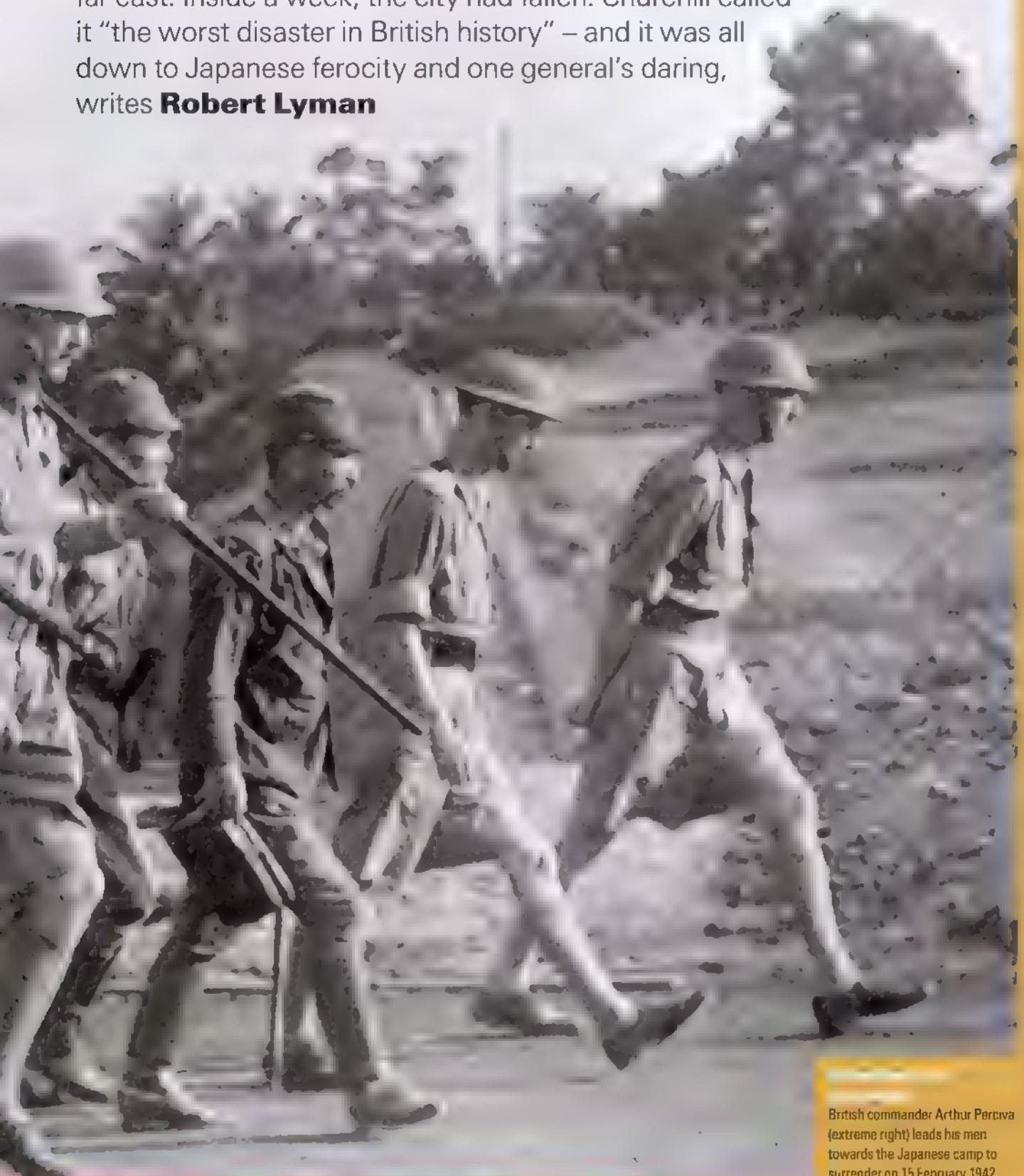
**"THE TROOPS ARE TO PUT UP FANATICAL RESISTANCE IN THEIR POSITIONS," HITLER DECLARED, "WITHOUT BEING DISTRACTED BY ENEMY BREAKTHROUGHS"**

Evan Mawdsley is an honorary professorial research fellow at the University of Glasgow. A second edition of his book *World War II: A New History* will be published by CUP in May 2020

# BRITAIN'S GREATEST HUMILIATION



In 1942, Japan launched an all-out driving assault on 'Fortress Singapore', Britain's impregnable jewel in the far east. Inside a week, the city had fallen. Churchill called it "the worst disaster in British history" – and it was all down to Japanese ferocity and one general's daring, writes **Robert Lyman**



British commander Arthur Percival (extreme right) leads his men towards the Japanese camp to surrender on 15 February 1942

Singapore fell to attack from Malaya by the Japanese 25th Army, led by Lieutenant General Tomoyuki Yamashita (pronounced 'Ya-mash-ta'), in February 1942. The Axis victory was the culmination of an amphibious operation launched on the morning of 8 December 1941 along the eastern Malay and Thai coastlines. Yamashita became known as the 'Tiger of Malaya' for the capture, a military feat of unusual brilliance that owed much to what he had learned touring the European battlefields in 1940 and 1941. He saw how well-equipped and -defended countries had fallen like dominoes in the face of a decisive, combined arms attack, noting the immense psychological value of fast-moving armoured columns attacking with integrated artillery and air support.

Japan's plan was to capture Malaya and thereby lay siege to Singapore. These two were incredibly valuable British assets in Asia. Producing nearly 40 per cent of the world's rubber and almost 60 per cent of the world's tin, Malaya was a prize to surpass all others. As for 'Fortress Singapore', Japanese intelligence had shown it to be ill-prepared for war. The plan was to push rapidly down the long thin spine of the Malay peninsula, attacking Singapore through its weakly guarded back door. This would mean confronting the British not where they were strongest – the seaward defences of Singapore Island, bristling with anti-ship artillery – but where they had no defences at all, across the Straits of Johor, which separated Singapore from the mainland.

Yamashita's strategy was to use two divisions to capture Malaya, concentrating both in an advance along the main route that led south towards Singapore on the west coast. He did not have enough resources to attack on more than a single front. When Singapore was reached, he would then bring in the fresh 18th Division, until then in Indochina, to help in the assault. He intended to strike deep and fast at the earliest opportunity, overwhelming his enemy by establishing and maintaining a battlefield tempo that would never allow the British to recover the initiative. This 'driving charge' (*kirimomi sakusen*) involved constant pressure on a narrow front, with the enemy allowed no opportunity to rest. Yamashita's intelligence had told him that the bulk of the British Army in Malaya was inferior in training and morale to his own troops. Reconnaissance had provided a detailed picture of the terrain, obstacles and primary enemy dispositions. By contrast, his forces



**Eye of the tiger** Lieutenant General Yamashita had toured European battlefields, noting the efficacy of a combined arms attack

were experienced, hardy and well-prepared.

The Japanese also had far more aircraft than the British. This allowed him to intimidate the civilian population of Singapore, as well as demoralise British empire troops who saw their own feeble air force shot from the sky. From the outset of the campaign, Yamashita recognised that control of the air was a product of the speed with which devastating offensive action could be launched. The faster he acted, the more rapidly would the British air effort be destroyed, and the faster, therefore, could his ground forces deploy. His troops were also intensely motivated. The war was widely perceived as a new dawn for Japan. There was a very real sense, sustained over many years by effective militarist propaganda, that the invasion forces were the divine instruments for securing Japan's destiny.

If numbers alone determined the outcome of battles, Yamashita had no chance of success. Throughout the entire campaign, he was heavily outnumbered. He landed in Thailand on 8 December with 26,000 men

## YAMASHITA'S STRATEGY WAS TO STRIKE DEEP AND FAST AT THE EARLIEST POSSIBLE OPPORTUNITY

(of whom 17,230 were combat troops), and was reinforced within days by the 2nd Guards Division (13,000 men), which took his total strength in Malaya to 39,000.

By the time he had reached Singapore Island, he had suffered 4,565 casualties; however, he was then reinforced by 13,000 troops of the 18th Division, who arrived in the southern Thai city of Singora on 23 January, a month after the initial landings. He had, by this stage, a mere 18 tanks remaining from a starting figure of 80.

The Japanese were able to confirm the number of British, Indian and Australian defenders through the numbers they took prisoner. These totalled 130,000, including 55,000 Indians, and clearly excluded the many thousands able to escape from Singapore in the dying days of the campaign. The defeated British commander, 54-year old Lieutenant General Arthur Percival, had always believed that he was faced by overwhelming odds – at least 150,000 men and 300 tanks.

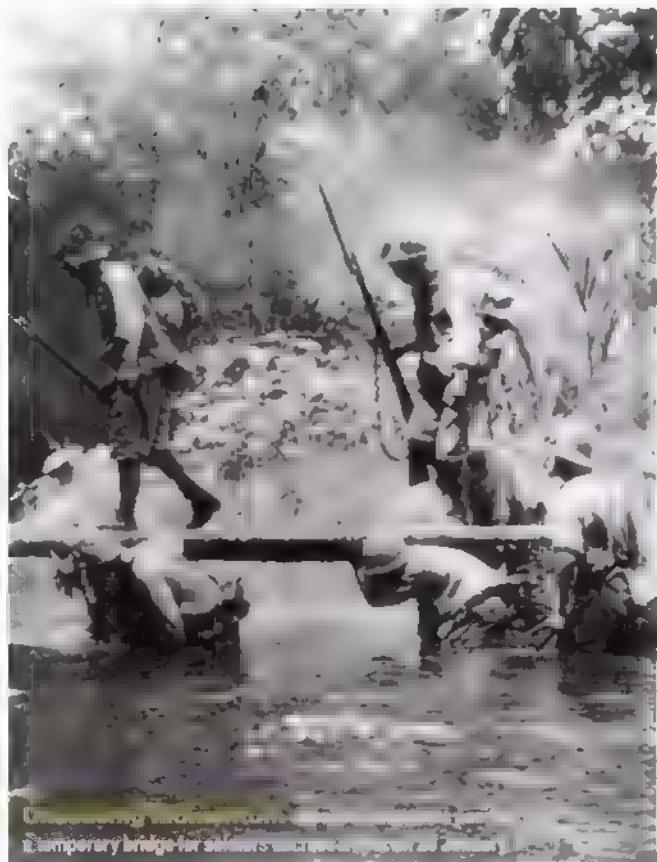
### A relentless advance

From the very first engagement at Jitra in Malaya, against the 11th Indian Division, Yamashita's troops pushed the British back, delighted at the weakness of their opposition. Taken by surprise by the relentless violence of the Japanese tactics, the British, Indian and Australian troops fell back. A pattern of defeat and withdrawal began that was only to end at the gates of Singapore 55 days later. With the British breaking far easier and more quickly than expected, Yamashita launched his *kirimomi sakusen*. Every possible means was used to maintain the momentum of the advance. Without waiting for orders, his vanguard – comprising infantry, armour, engineers and close-air support, working in unison – fought forward and aggressively without any thought for their rear. Their task was to push hard, ignoring their supply lines, while relying on captured supplies. No time was wasted. Forces were formed, re-formed and brought together to meet the needs of the hour. Units leapfrogged each other as lead elements became tired, to ensure an unremitting tempo. The tactic was that of a pneumatic hammer or battering ram, relentlessly beating against a single spot, being fed by continuous fresh momentum from the rear.

On the whole, the Japanese were much more versatile and flexible soldiers than the armies they came across in 1942. They required less food, shelter and transport than Allied troops, and were trained to advance at speed, carrying rations and supplies with them for several days. They

### **Speed demons**

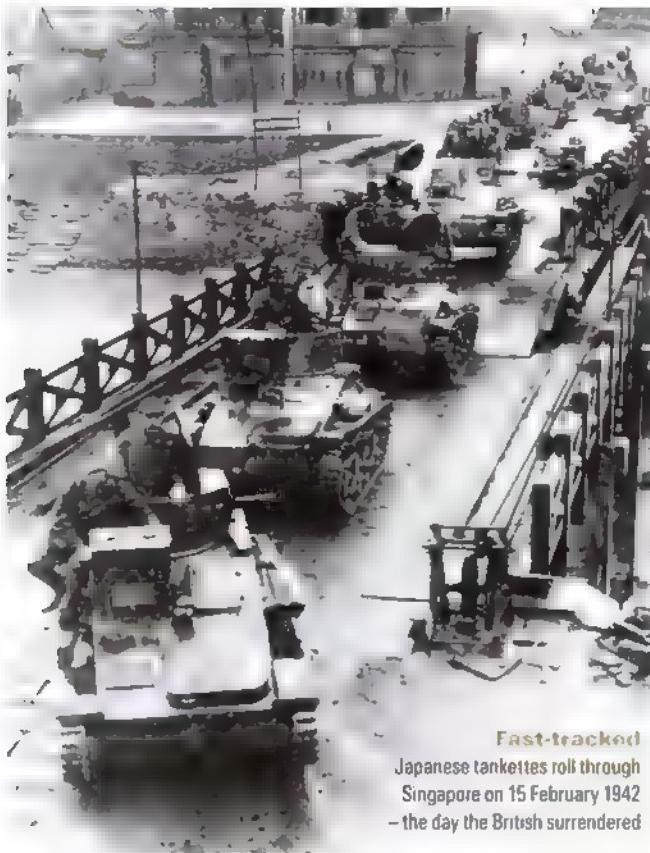
Japanese infantry sprint into the town of Johor Bahru, on the Straits of Johor, around 31 January 1942



**Gathering storm** A thunderhead rises above hot and humid Singapore on 5 February – three days before the attack



## 1942 The battle of Singapore



**Fast-tracked**  
Japanese tankettes roll through  
Singapore on 15 February 1942  
– the day the British surrendered



**victory**  
Allied prisoners of war after  
their surrender. Japan took  
a staggering 130,000 captives



**Hard bargain**  
Yamashita demands the  
unconditional surrender  
of Lieutenant General  
Percival, front centre

learned to live off what they captured – which they called “Churchill rations” – and were far less reliant than western armies on logistics and supply.

The Japanese were also much harder than British and Indian soldiers at the time, used to living and sleeping out in the open while on the march. They were not dismayed by the jungle, and used it to move undetected. They needed fewer instructions and relied to a far greater extent on the initiative of small unit leaders. They were determined, brave and willing to die for their emperor. They also had the bicycle. In each division, there were roughly 500 motor vehicles and 6,000 bicycles, although in Malaya, of course, the number of vehicles was swollen by the capture of British transport.

#### Capturing Britain's prize

With Malaya fallen, Yamashita was now faced with the daunting prospect of attacking and capturing the great Fortress Singapore – the fabled bastion of British power and prestige in Asia. With his three divisions now facing Singapore from the north, Yamashita drew up his plan. He decided to use all three divisions to assault across the Straits of Johor, with the main attack coming from the north-west via two divisions, and the Guards undertaking a diversionary attack to the east. The Guards were to capture Pulau Ubin island on 7 February, and the 5th and 18th Divisions would cross the Straits of Johor the following night. Reconnaissance and staff work for the crossing was completed by 4 February.

By now, however, Yamashita's risks had multiplied alarmingly. His supplies – fuel, ammunition and rations – were very low. In fact, he was relying exclusively on captured British stocks of fuel and was down to four days' worth of rations, with artillery ammunition restricted to only 440 rounds for each remaining gun. The line of communication back to Singora was proving difficult to manage. He had somehow to transport two divisions across the Straits of Johor, a formidable water obstacle, and after nearly 60 days of continuous operations his troops were exhausted. But he knew that, if he faltered now, all he had gained could so easily be lost.

Plans for crossing the Straits of Johor were made in great secrecy and utilised deception to the full. Yamashita's artillery bombardment began on 5 February, targeting the three northern airfields, the now-deserted and evacuated Singapore Naval Base, and principal road junctions. Yamashita expertly exploited the psychological dimension of battle. His artillery attacks on Singapore were designed to create panic, and a feeling that the end was near, that

## YAMASHITA SPOKE NO ENGLISH. HIS AGGRESSION WAS PURE BLUFF, BUT IT WORKED AND PERCIVAL SURRENDERED

nothing that the British could now do would be enough to reverse the situation. This psychological dominance was to do untold damage to the forces expected to defend Singapore, especially those newly arrived and poorly trained.

By the morning of 13 February, the Japanese had pushed Percival's forces back to a 28-mile perimeter around Singapore city. Yamashita was desperately short now of petrol and artillery ammunition, and it was clear that he could not sustain a long siege. After he told Percival on 12 February to surrender, white flags appeared on Sunday 15 February. Yamashita's bluff had worked, and the rattled British were now prepared to parley. Percival journeyed with a small number of his staff officers to the now-silent Ford factory at Bukit Timah late in the afternoon.

Yamashita spoke no English. He was desperately concerned about the exhaustion of his troops, his shortages of ammunition and the prospect of having to conduct street fighting in Singapore city against a numerically superior foe. He wanted an immediate end to the fighting, demanding a simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ from Percival. His aggression – both individually and as an army – was, as he admitted, pure bluff, but it worked. Shaken, Percival agreed, and tens of thousands of British, Indian, Malay and Australian troops laid down their arms. It was apparent to Yamashita that Percival's most senior commanders no longer had the heart to continue the fight. It is also clear that, while many soldiers fought on stout-heartedly, many more did not, and sought sanctuary where they could find it, away from the relentless squeeze placed by Yamashita's army.

Percival's options were limited. The Japanese had control of the huge stocks of food in the centre of the island: in any case, the town, swollen by refugees and soldiery, could not sustain itself without access to water, now in Japanese hands. Like the island, the town was not constructed or prepared for defence, and a prolongation

of the battle would merely have placed the innocent masses further in harm's way.

#### A gruesome aftermath

Yamashita had instructed his soldiers to obey the laws of war. Many did not. The Japanese soldiery tended to despise an enemy who gave up after half-hearted resistance. In Singapore, when troops bayoneted some 320 patients and staff of the Alexandra Hospital, Yamashita promptly executed the officer responsible. Likewise, after three soldiers had committed rape and pillage in Penang, the men were executed, and the battalion commander condemned to 30 days' close arrest. But Yamashita also ordered the actions that led to the massacre of 40,000 Chinese after the city's fall, known as Sook Ching (a Chinese term meaning ‘purification by elimination’). This act of egregious barbarism formed part of the charge sheet against him when he was tried and executed as a war criminal after the war.

Militarily, the Malayan campaign was – for both Yamashita and his 25th Army – a stunning triumph. That he was able to capture Singapore with the loss of only 9,656 men (of which 3,507 were killed), taking upwards of 130,000 prisoners, is as remarkable an achievement as the blitzkrieg that destroyed France in 1940. It was a humiliation for Britain – something Churchill was later to describe as “the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history”. He was right. In 1942, at least, the Japanese proved themselves better at waging war than the British. There is no escaping the judgement of Lieutenant General Henry Pownall that the British had been comprehensively “out-generaled, outwitted and outfought”.

Many of the prisoners of war taken were destined to languish until 1945 in the notorious Changi prison in Singapore, where malaria, dysentery and beatings were rife. Others suffered the trauma of being transported to Siam (modern Thailand) to build the infamous Burma Railway, also known as the Death Railway. Of the 61,000 Allied soldiers forced to work on the railway, more than 12,000 perished due to maltreatment.

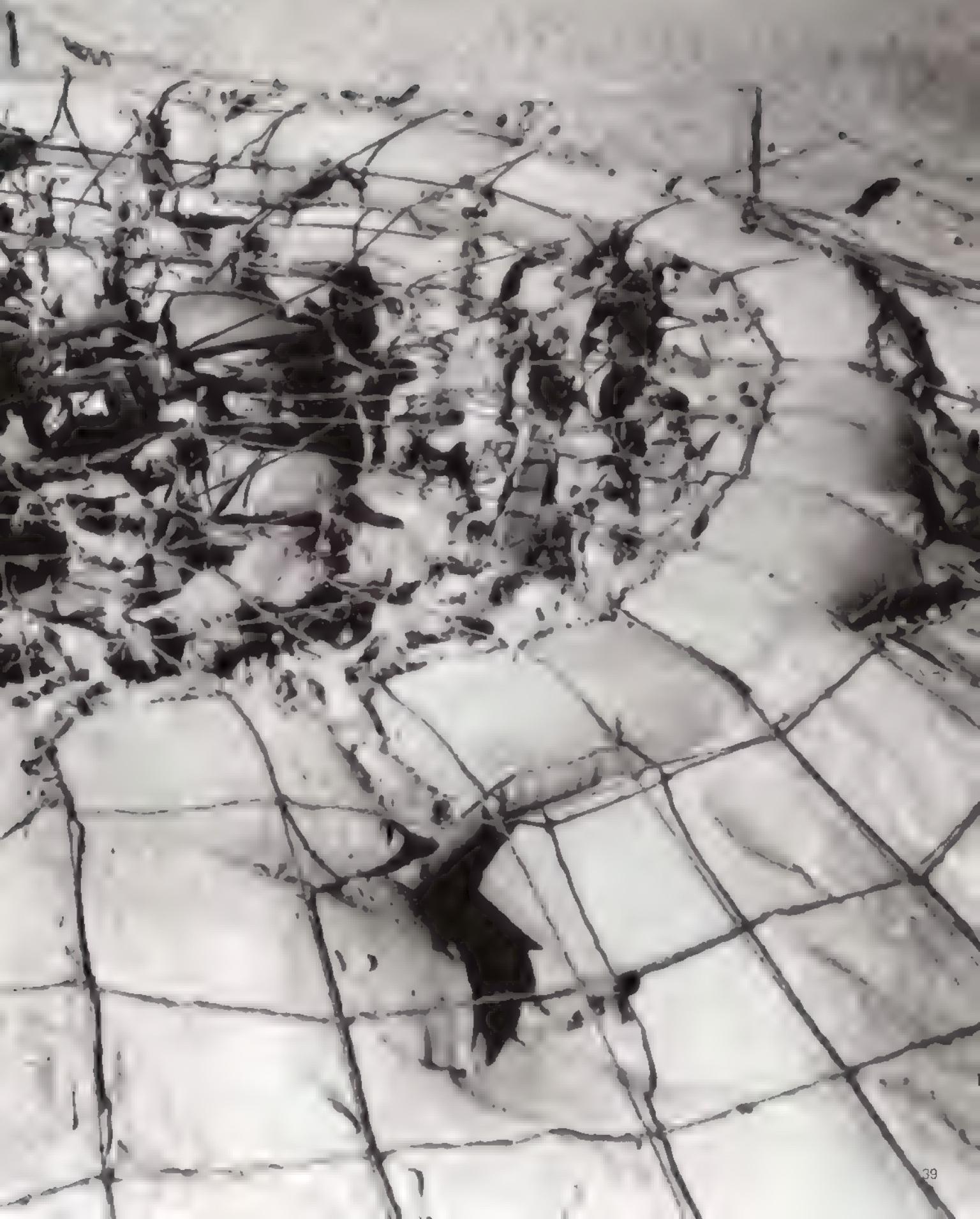
Percival himself, meanwhile, spent the rest of the war in a Japanese PoW camp in Manchuria, but he never shook off the reputation of being the man unequal to the task of retaining Malaya and Singapore. He retired from the army in 1946 and – unusually for a British lieutenant general – never received a knighthood. ■

**Robert Lyman** is a historian and author whose books include *Japan's Last Bid for Victory: The Invasion of India, 1944* (Pen & Sword, 2011)

## Down to the wire

An Allied machine-gun nest in the Egyptian desert in August 1940. The spider's web of barbed wire makes for superb camouflage, and gun and soldier are hardly visible. Early British successes would force the Italians into retreat in north Africa - before German general Erwin Rommel, the 'Desert Fox', turned the tide ahead of two decisive showdowns at El Alamein.





No more reverses. That was the message that the British 8th Army carried into the second battle of El Alamein in October 1942. What happened next transformed British fortunes in the desert war. But, asks **James Holland**, did victory come at too high a price?

# A LINE IN THE SAND



**A**t around 9.40pm on Friday 23 October 1942, Flight Lieutenant Tommy Thompson, a Battle of Britain and Malta veteran, was flying over the Alamein line on his return from a strafing mission. Suddenly, the guns below opened up and it seemed to Thompson that one massive flash of fire had erupted in a long line. Mesmerised, he circled around at 3,000 feet and watched. Further away, he spotted a wave of bombers pounding enemy positions too. "A magnificent sight," he recalled. "What an artillery battle."

On the ground, 22-year-old Corporal Albert Martin of 2nd Battalion, Rifle Brigade had never heard anything like it in the two long years he'd been in the desert. He'd been feeling on edge and nervy all day, knowing they would be going into battle that night, and that it would be a tough fight. Roughly 116,000 Germans and Italians were dug in behind

## MONTGOMERY ASSURED THEM THAT THE GERMANS AND ITALIANS COULD BE DRIVEN FROM ALL OF AFRICA FOR GOOD

millions of mines and thick entanglements of wire, and supported by guns, tanks, machine-guns and mortars.

Nor was Martin pleased about his role. The Rifle Brigade had been used to independence and mobility, beetling about the desert in trucks. That night, as the battle began, their job was to protect the engineers as they cleared six paths through the mine-fields. It was through these lanes, each the

width of a tennis court, that the mass of armour was due to pour, get in behind the enemy and then exploit their advantage.

As Martin listened to the deafening blasts of 900 guns, and felt the shockwaves pulsing through the ground, he knew the wait was over. As the gunners' loading rhythm changed, so the sky became a kaleidoscope of flickering colour. The second battle of El Alamein had begun, and if successful, as the British 8th Army commander General Montgomery had assured them it would be, the Germans and Italians could be driven from all of Africa for good.

### Bickering and bellyaching

The 8th Army had undergone quite some transformation since ignominious defeats at Gazala and Tobruk back in June 1942. However, it was not poor equipment or training – as some claimed at the time, and have done ever since – that caused these reverses, but poor generalship. Neil Ritchie, the 8th Army commander, had been

Churchill tanks advance across the desert during the second battle of El Alamein, October 1942. Since its defeat in France two years earlier, the British Army's growth had been impressive, and El Alamein was the arena where it first made things count against the Germans



over-promoted, and had no control or authority over his bickering subordinates. Indecision and lack of clear thinking led to an entirely unnecessary disaster. In contrast, the RAF in the Middle East was ably led by Air Marshal Arthur Tedder, while his subordinate, Air Vice Marshal Arthur Coningham, had shown the dynamic leadership that had been so lacking in his army colleagues.

The British finally halted German general Erwin Rommel's dramatic advance at the Alamein position, but a clearout of senior commanders was now urgently required. Out went General Auchinleck, the Commander-in-Chief Middle East, and so too did a host of other commanders. Ritchie included. In their stead came General Sir Harold Alexander as C-in-C and General Bernard Montgomery as the new 8th Army commander. In August 1942, they were the right team, both utterly committed to ensuring there were no more reverses. Both also recognised that the biggest problem for 8th Army was one of morale – and this was one that needed righting quickly.

## MONTGOMERY RECOGNISED THAT NOTHING LESS THAN A DECISIVE VICTORY WOULD DO IN THE 8TH ARMY'S NEXT ENGAGEMENT

Alexander was the most experienced battlefield commander of any side in the war, having commanded in action at every rank. He'd even led German troops in the Baltic Landwehr against Russia in 1919. Utterly imperturbable, charming and full of good judgment, he understood all facets of war; he protected his army commander from interference from London and oversaw the swift build-up of supplies in Egypt. Meanwhile, Montgomery – known as 'Monty'

– was highly capable, no-nonsense and a fine trainer of men. He did not tolerate "belly aching", as he called it. This was an attitude that was sorely needed at the time.

At the end of August, when Rommel made his last attempt to break the Alamein position, Montgomery fought a good defensive battle and sensibly resisted the urge to counterattack in turn. Unlike Ritchie and Auchinleck, he also worked closely and well with Coningham and the RAF; the defensive victory at Alam el Halfa, as the battle became known, belonged as much to the RAF as it did the 8th Army. Monty also recognised, as Alexander had realised, that nothing less than a decisive victory would do in their next engagement. For that to happen, he argued, more tanks, guns and men were needed – and his troops required more training.

### A dash for Tunis

Immense pressure was being put on Alexander to launch the battle as soon as possible; at the same time, preparations were underway for a joint Anglo-US invasion force to land in north-west Africa, overrun

## The war in the sun 10 MILESTONES ON THE ROAD TO EL ALAMEIN

### 1 Mussolini goes on the attack

The Italian leader declared war on Britain in June 1940 and began desultory attacks on the British island of Malta at the heart of the Mediterranean. On 4 July, the British destroyed the French fleet at Oran on the coast of French Algeria – to prevent it falling into German hands – and on 9 July the Royal Navy's Mediterranean fleet fought the Italians at the battle of Calabria.

### 2 The Italians are put to flight

In September 1940, the Italian 10th Army advanced into Egypt. In October, the Italians also invaded Greece but were swiftly repulsed. On 9 December, the 36,000-strong Western Desert Force under General Richard O'Connor counter-attacked in Egypt, and over the next three months routed the 10th Army and much of the Italian 5th Army, capturing 131,000 out of 160,000 Italian troops in north Africa. British forces also attacked Italian forces in Abyssinia, east Africa. Cut off from all but air supply, the Italians were soon in retreat.

### 3 The Germans enter the fray

In February 1941, Hitler sent General Erwin Rommel with two divisions of the newly formed Afrika Korps to Tripoli to support the Italian forces there. In April, German forces invaded Yugoslavia, quickly overran the country and then advanced into Greece.

### 4 Rommel sweeps all before him

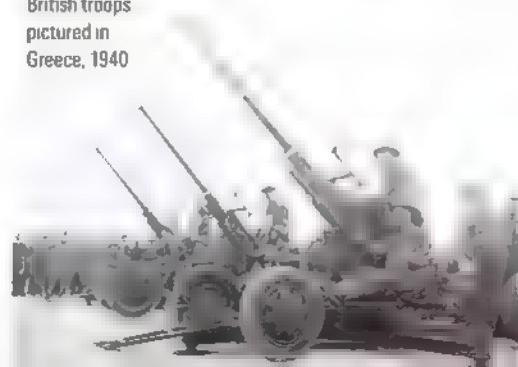
Having forced the Italians back to El Agheila, halfway to Tripoli, British troops were withdrawn from the Western Desert Force and sent to Greece. It was too little too late and, lacking strong enough air support, Greece soon faced the same fate as Yugoslavia. In north Africa, Rommel advanced well beyond his orders, recapturing Cyrenaica, pushing the British back into Egypt and besieging the port of Tobruk.

### 5 The Germans capture Crete

The majority of British troops were safely evacuated from Greece but, in the third week of May, German airborne troops attacked Crete. Fatal errors of judgment by the commander of Creteforce, New Zealander General Bernard Freyberg, and the local commanders at Maleme airfield, ensured the Germans got a toehold they were then able to exploit, albeit at considerable cost and just a few weeks before their invasion of the Soviet Union. Crete fell to the Germans and, though most British troops were evacuated, the Royal Navy suffered considerable losses.

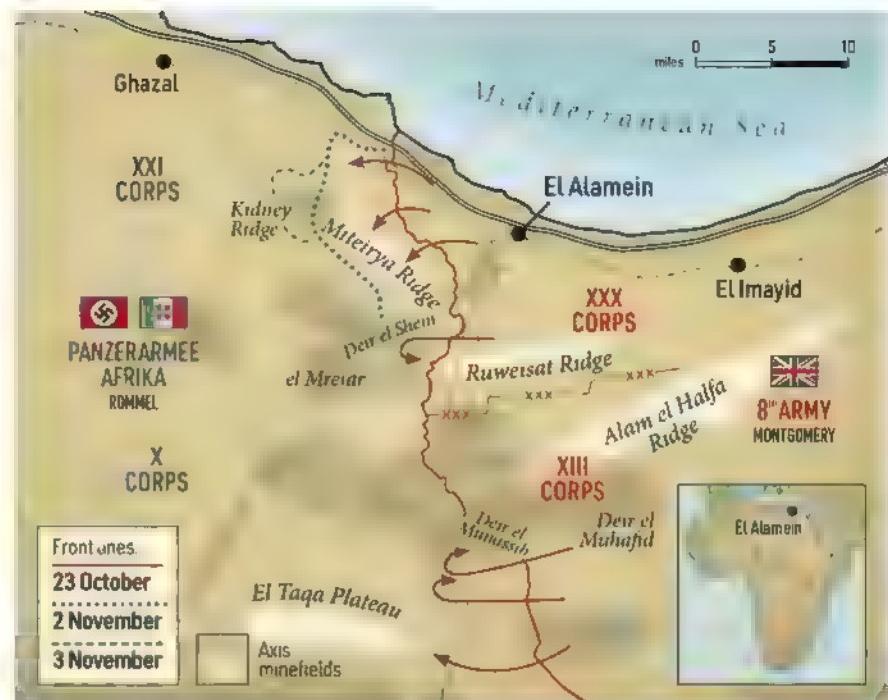


Benito Mussolini's men were routed by the British in Egypt



the Vichy French in Algeria and Morocco and then make a dash for Tunis. The aim was for the Axis forces in Africa to be crushed by a two-pronged attack from west and east. But the destruction of Rommel's Panzerarmee Afrika, now at El Alamein, had to happen first.

Montgomery insisted his attack could not be launched before October. Eventually, it was agreed that 8th Army's assault would begin on the night of 23 October, when there was a full moon. His plan was to punch two holes through the Axis defences, one in the north of the 40-mile line and another further south. The northern breach was to be the main one and was also where the enemy defences were strongest, but Monty wanted to hit Rommel head-on. His XXX Corps was to punch this hole to a depth of 3–5 miles through two channels, each of three lanes. Through these narrow lanes, X Corps was to pass and burst out into the open desert beyond. British tanks would hold the inferior numbers of Axis tanks at bay while the infantry destroyed the enemy infantry through a process Monty called "crumbling". Meanwhile, XIII Corps



The second battle of El Alamein saw the 8th Army punch holes in Axis defences and then employ overwhelming firepower to subdue the enemy, as our map shows

## the struggle

In June 1941, the British counterattacked the German-Italian forces in Egypt but made little headway and General Wavell, C-in-C Middle East was sacked and replaced by General Claude Auchinleck. In June, British and Free French troops attacked Vichy French Syria and by July had obtained its surrender. Pro-German revolts in Iraq and Iran were also quelled.



Claude Auchinleck oversaw the defence of the Alamein Line

## Rommel

In November, the newly formed 8th Army counterattacked Rommel's forces in north Africa. Weakened after three-quarters of his supplies had been destroyed by mostly Malta-based aircraft, ships and submarines, Rommel's army was pushed back and Tobruk relieved.



## annihilation

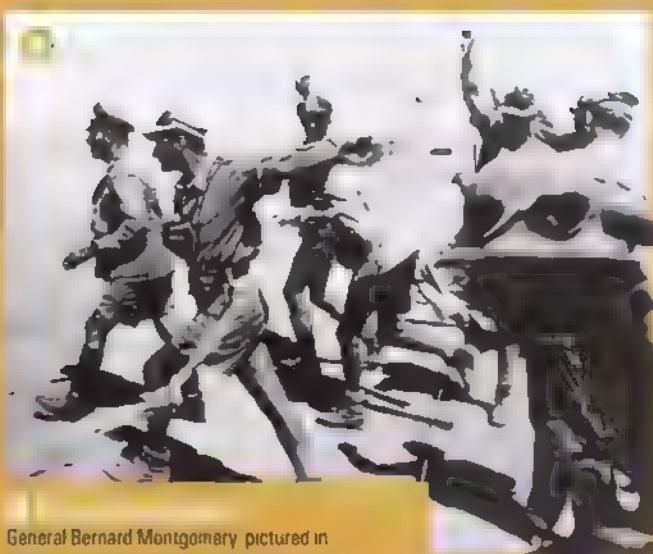
At the end of 1941, Field Marshal Kesselring had been made C-in-C of Axis forces in the south and, recognising that Malta needed to be neutralised, began an aerial blitz of the island. By April, Malta had become the most bombed place on Earth. But a planned invasion was postponed

Rommel's German-Italian Panzerarmee counterattacked again on 26 May, smashing the Gazala Line and capturing Tobruk on 21 June 1942 in what was unquestionably one of the worst-conducted battles the British fought in the entire war. The 8th Army now in full retreat to the Alamein Line just 60 miles from Alexandria, was only saved from annihilation by the round-the-clock effort of the RAF's Desert Air Force. General Neil Ritchie, 8th Army commander, was sacked and Auchinleck took over direct command

The Alamein Line, unlike elsewhere in north Africa, could not be easily outflanked because of the deep Qattara Depression escarpment 40 miles to the south. In the first battle of El Alamein, Rommel tried to force his way through, but in a series of clashes that raged through the month of July, neither side was able to force a decisive outcome. Stalemate ensued – until the second battle of El Alamein

Civilians clear debris following an air raid on Valletta, Malta

## Victory at El Alamein



General Bernard Montgomery pictured in c1942, assured his troops that victory would be theirs at El Alamein

Field Marshal Erwin Rommel (far left) near El Alamein, November 1942. "We're simply being crushed by weight of numbers," wrote the German commander to his wife, as massive British firepower forced his troops into retreat

Italian troops run for cover during an RAF air raid, 26 October 1942. Victory at El Alamein would give the Allies an unstoppable momentum in the north African campaign



would break through in the south and split the Axis forces in half.

Every man rehearsed the process over and over. Deception plans were also brought into play and Montgomery placed a huge reliance, as ever, on the increasingly dependable RAF and his artillery. Overwhelming firepower was the name of the game.

Monty reckoned victory would take about 10 days. The first part was the 'break-in'. Then came the 'dogfight' – the slogging grind of enemy forces. Last would come the 'break-out' by the armour to secure victory.

Broadly, this was what happened, although inevitably there were twists and turns and setbacks, not least on the opening night. Pouring masses of armour through six lanes, each only eight yards wide, was ambitious, especially in the north where the desert soil was fine sand. The tracks of hundreds of tanks, tow-to-tail, quickly ground the sand as fine as talcum powder, which combined with immense amounts of smoke to cloak the battlefield. Corporal Albert Martin had little idea of what was going on and was soon caked in choking dust and could see little. Nor could the tanks, which began crashing into one another and overheating.

Then the enemy guns, apparently not remotely destroyed, opened up. By dawn, much of the British armour was exposed in the open. "It was quite one of the worst moments of my life," noted Major Stanley Christopherson, commander of A Squadron, the Sherwood Rangers. "I couldn't go forward, but all the heavy tanks were behind me so I couldn't go back... we just had to sit there." He survived, although many of his crews were not so fortunate.

The battle ground on over the ensuing days. Despite the success of the Australians in the very north, Monty paused on 26 October. Meanwhile, Albert Martin and his comrades in the Rifle Brigade had become temporary anti-tank gunners and, having edged forward overnight on 28 October, woke to find themselves confronting the main Axis panzer counterattack. It was to prove a decisive day as they stubbornly held their ground and knocked out 70 enemy tanks and self-propelled guns. How he'd managed to survive that ordeal, he had no idea.

Early on 2 November, Montgomery relaunched his attack, codenamed 'Supercharge'. In essence, it was more of the same, but it did what the opening phase had failed to do: break the back of the Panzerarmee's defence.

The end was now in sight. "The battle is going heavily against us," Rommel wrote to his wife on 3 November. "We're simply being

## SUPERIOR NUMBERS, SUPERIOR FIREPOWER AND THE RELENTLESS AIR ASSAULT BY THE RAF HAD BLUDGEONED ROMMEL'S FORCES INTO DEFEAT

crushed by the enemy weight." That summed it up neatly. Superior numbers, superior firepower and the relentless air assault by the RAF had bludgeoned Rommel's forces into a terminal defeat. By 4 November, the Panzerarmee was on the run, streaming back west across the desert.

The second battle of El Alamein was the first decisive land victory by the British against German forces, and came less than two and a half years after the catastrophic defeat of France and the retreat of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk. Back then, Britain's army had been tiny. Its growth since had been impressive.

Alexander and Montgomery's victory also showed that, despite the defeat at Gazala four months earlier, there was much already in place that Britain was getting right: decent equipment, determined troops, an increasingly effective tactical air force and a greater dependence on technology and firepower, all of which played to British strengths.

### Tactically turgid

But for all that the British Army was a transformed force, the second battle of El Alamein was a flawed victory. There's little doubt that, though it made a hero of Monty, it was a tactically turgid campaign – one that wasted lives and materiel.

General Francis Tuker had commanded the 4th Indian Division at El Alamein and was one of the brightest, yet one of the most underused, commanders the British had. Earlier in the year, with Rommel on the charge, he suggested to Auchinleck and Ritchie that, rather than falling back to the Alamein line, it made far more sense for the 8th Army to establish a defensive position at Tobruk, which had an open supply line to the sea and had withstood all the enemy had thrown at it during a siege that had lasted half the previous year. As he pointed out, Rommel could not simply bypass such a bastion. Tuker was right, but his good advice was ignored, and the

8th Army was almost annihilated.

Montgomery never asked his advice before the second battle of El Alamein, but Tuker was firmly of the view that it made sense to strike a heavy blow with infantry, supported by artillery on a narrow front in the north, around a feature or ridge that meant the Panzerarmee simply had to counterattack. The key, he reckoned, was to draw in the bulk of the Axis armour in the north.

While most of the Panzerarmee's armour and artillery was caught up with this attack, Tuker would have made a second thrust simultaneously in the centre of the line with the bulk of the armour, where the defences were not as strong. This plan made good sense.

Tuker's biggest beef with Monty's ideas, however, was over his fire plan at the start of the battle. Of the 900 field guns available, Monty only employed 400 in support of the main thrust in the north – that is, less than half. This meant that 500 guns were not being used in the main thrust; of these, more than 300 were employed to support the feint thrust of XIII Corps to the south.

Perhaps more inexplicable, though, was the way the guns were used. A central tenet of war is the concentration of force. For all his new stamp and fighting talk, Montgomery dispersed his firepower not only in terms of its spread along the length of their line, but also in the way the guns were fired. Those 400 in the north were spread over 10 miles, with just 100 guns supporting each of the four attacking divisions. That wasn't very many, especially since they were mostly firing straight ahead. A far better plan would have been to have attacked over, say, 5 miles, with 750 guns firing in concentration.

So the second battle of El Alamein wasn't the masterpiece that has often been portrayed, and it could be argued that the 8th Army paid far too high a price for victory. This won't, of course, prevent it from being remembered as a turning point in the war in north Africa – and nor should it, for El Alamein set the British on the path to the capture of Tunis six months later. Here, in a triumph that would secure victory in north Africa, Allied troops captured or killed 250,000 Axis troops and seized a vast amount of enemy materiel. In doing so, they inflicted an even bigger material defeat on the Germans than the one at Stalingrad three months earlier. ▀

**James Holland** is a historian, broadcaster and author. His latest book is *Normandy '44: D-Day and the Battle for France* (Bantam Press, 2019), which is accompanied by a three-part TV series

# PART TWO

# 1942-1944

|||| Crewmen escaped from blazing tanks with their clothes on fire, and desperately rolled on the ground to put out the flames ||||



Allied troops of a field artillery battery, following the advance of the infantry, emplace a 155mm howitzer in France, 1944

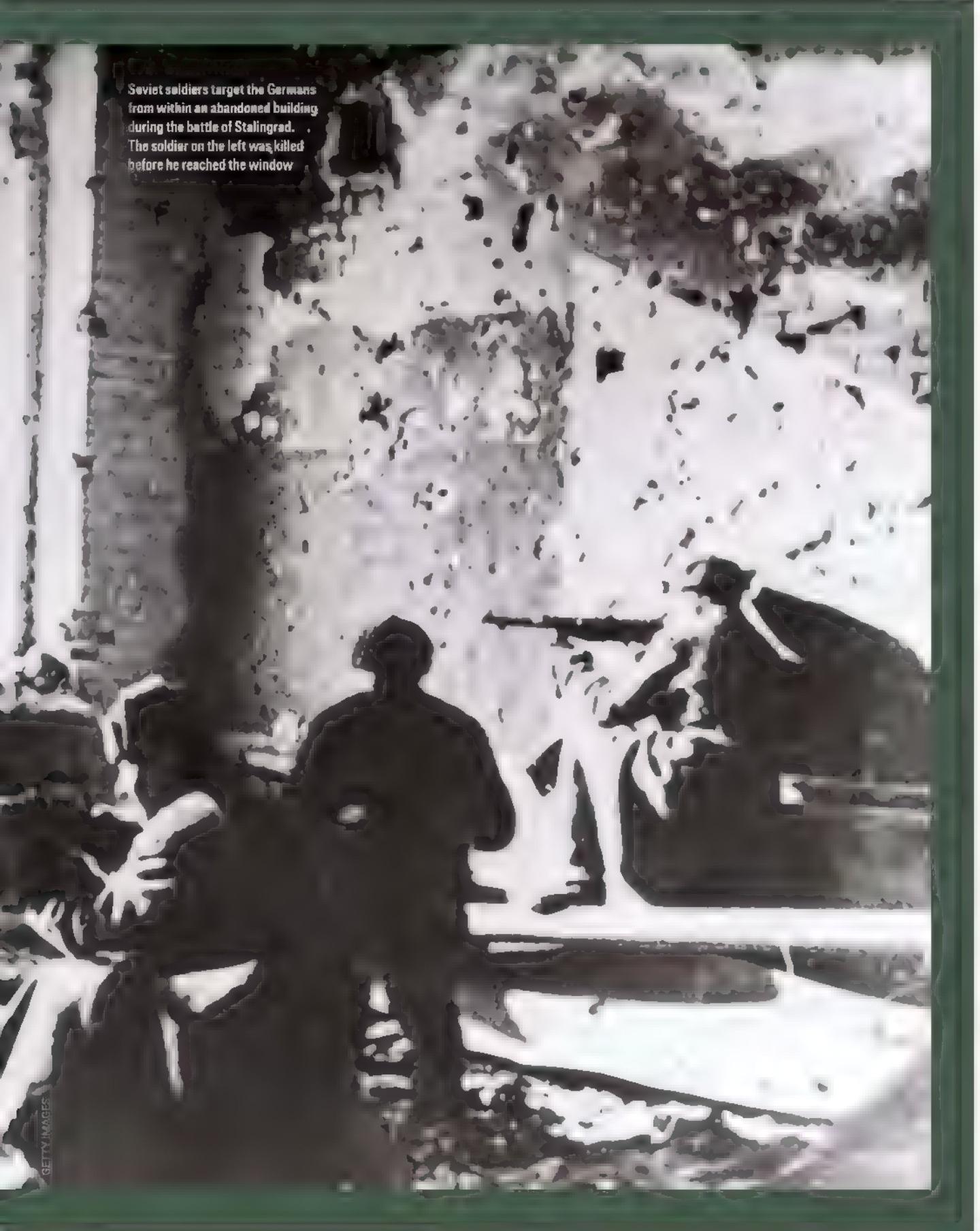
# THE REICH'S FATAL MISTAKE

It was supposed to demonstrate Nazi supremacy – but Hitler's bid to take Stalingrad went horribly wrong.

**Peter Caddick-Adams** explains how the Soviet Union managed to inflict a decisive defeat



Soviet soldiers target the Germans from within an abandoned building during the battle of Stalingrad. The soldier on the left was killed before he reached the window



## 1942–43 The battle of Stalingrad

**F**rom its foundation in the mid-16th century, the old fortress town at the confluence of the Tsaritsa and Volga rivers has had three identities. Originally called Tsaritsyn and today labelled Volgograd, it was known for a mere 36 years (1925–61) by the name with which it will be eternally associated: Stalingrad.

The very name quickly became shorthand for the Nazi defeat in the east, and even at the time was considered a turning point of the Second World War, by all sides – Soviet and German included.

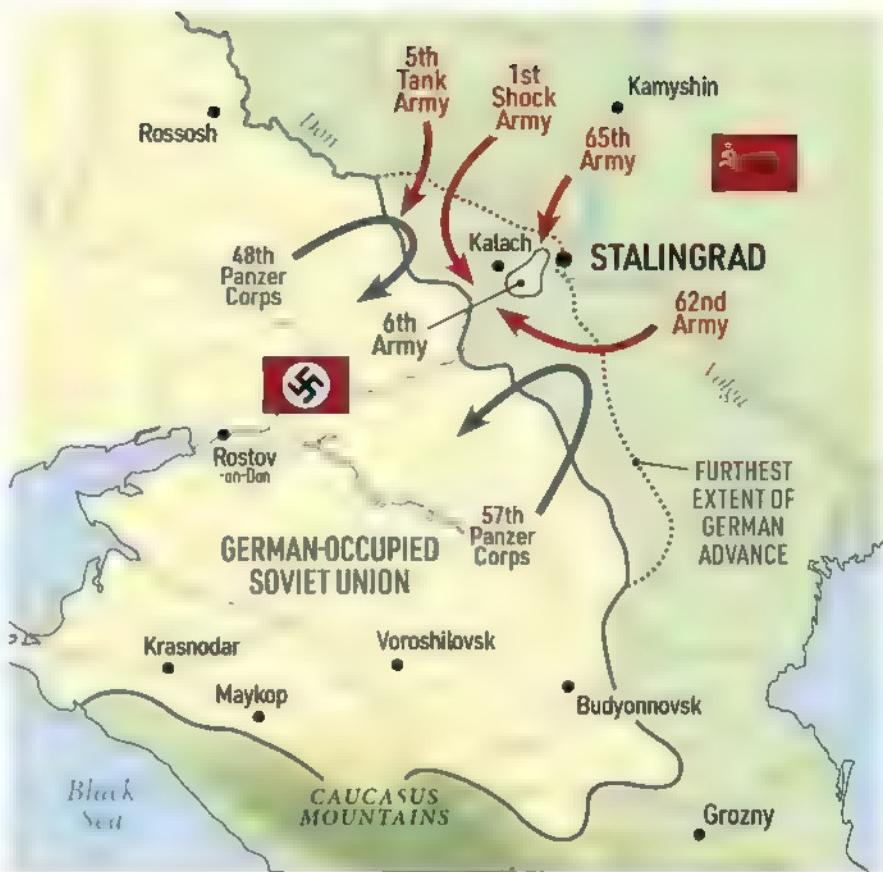
More than 75 years after their victory at Stalingrad, the achievement of the Soviet people remains just as awe-inspiring. In 1941, Germany had almost conquered European Russia, being checked and rolled back only at the gates of Moscow. In November 1941, Field Marshal Fedor von Bock had visited an artillery command post, from where he could see the winter sun glinting off the Soviet capital's buildings through his field glasses. Two weeks later his men reached Kuntsevo, a western suburb of Moscow, before being repulsed. Starting on 6 December and through the winter of 1941–42, however, the Soviets struck back in a series of counteroffensives, removing the German threat to Moscow and making it clear that war on the eastern front was likely to become a long, attritional campaign.

Although the German army no longer had the strength and resources for a renewed offensive in 1942 on the scale of Operation Barbarossa, Hitler was adamant that remaining on the defensive and consolidating his gains was not an option.

While Hitler's forces had captured vast tracts of land, cities and important industrial resources, the Soviet Union remained unbowed. The Führer's Army General Staff (Oberkommando des Heeres, or OKH) therefore searched for an offensive solution that would employ fewer men, enable Germany to destroy most of the remaining Soviet armies and capture the Caucasus oil vital to the war effort of both sides – and so knock the Soviet Union out of the war.

Stalin was convinced there would be a renewed thrust towards Moscow but, achieving complete operational surprise, on 28 June 1942 von Bock instead unleashed Fall Blau (Case Blue), the continuation of Operation Barbarossa. His objective was not the Soviet capital, but the south.

Field Marshal von Bock's command was divided into Army Groups (Heeresgruppen) A and B. The former, under Wilhelm



In November 1942, Hitler ordered the taking of Stalingrad, crowning "We have got it!" But huge Soviet offensives were soon to trap and annihilate the German 6th Army

List, was ordered to swing south, cross the Caucasus mountains and reach the strategic resource of the Baku oil fields. Maximilian von Weichs's Army Group B was to protect its northern flanks by securing Voronezh (with Hoth's 4th Panzer Army); the regional capital, Stalingrad (using the 6th Army); and the Don and Volga rivers.

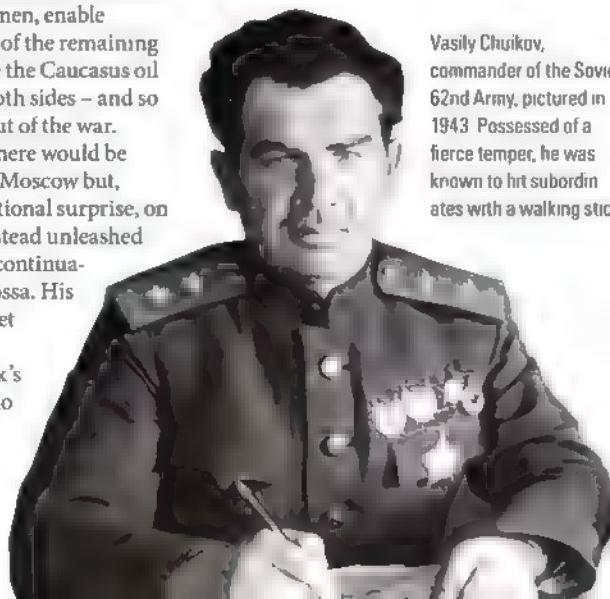
To the south, Field Marshal Ewald von Kleist's 1st Panzer Army surged towards the oil fields, reaching the westerly wells around Maykop in six weeks, though these were sabotaged as the Wehrmacht arrived.

As in 1941, the Soviet forces, with inferior training and equipment, were outmanoeuvred, with a repeat of the blitzkrieg tactics of the previous year. The Germans' integration of air and ground forces, targeting of Soviet command posts, and above all their speed, proved decisive.

### The lure of Stalingrad

This was arguably the USSR's weakest hour, for her generals appeared to have learned little from 1941, and her newly raised legions were barely trained and woefully short of air support, artillery and modern armour.

Hitler's direction of the new eastern campaign would prove disastrous, however, for he was torn continually between the overriding necessity of capturing the strategic oil resources in the Caucasus and seizing the city that bore the name of his personal adversary. Before succumbing to



Vasily Chuikov, commander of the Soviet 62nd Army, pictured in 1943. Possessed of a fierce temper, he was known to hit subordinates with a walking stick.

# HITLER WAS SETTING HIMSELF UP FOR A FALL OF CATASTROPHIC PROPORTIONS, FROM WHICH HIS REICH WOULD NEVER RECOVER

the lure of Stalingrad, then a city of 400,000, Hitler was on record as declaring: "If I do not get the oil of Maykop and Grozny, then I must end this war."

Within two months, on 23 August, General Paulus's 6th Army of 22 divisions (two of which were Romanian) had reached the outskirts of Stalingrad. His 200,000 men outnumbered the 54,000 defenders by nearly four to one. Since April, the city – an interwar showcase of communist achievement, with many modern factories, apartment blocks, contemporary public buildings and wide boulevards – had been suffering air raids from the Luftwaffe's Luftflotte (Air Fleet) 4, reducing much of the area to twisted rubble.

The battle of Stalingrad underlines the contrasts between the German and Soviet war machines. The two opposing commanders, 51-year-old Friedrich Paulus of the German 6th Army, and Vasily Chuikov, aged 42, commander of the Soviet 62nd Army, could not have been more different.

Paulus was a superbly talented staff officer, an outsider who lacked aristocratic or Prussian blood, came from relatively modest origins, and yet had risen to become General der Panzertruppen and chief staff officer of the 6th Army by the end of 1941.

Paulus was the very antithesis of his superior, the coarse and unkempt Field Marshal Walther von Reichenau, who loathed routine paperwork, preferring to be at the front. Yet when Reichenau died in January 1942, Paulus was considered his natural successor. Preferring to command from well behind the line, he possessed an unusual fixation for a soldier: he despised dirt, and bathed and changed uniforms, every day. With an eye for minute detail, and known by his nickname 'the ditherer', Paulus had spent most of his professional life on the staff. While a nimble administrator and logistician,

he had rarely been called upon to lead.

If Paulus was a ditherer, his opponent was the very opposite. Possessed of a volatile temper, and known to use his walking stick to strike subordinates who displeased him, Chuikov had a weatherbeaten face that proclaimed him a born fighter of even humbler background.

The eighth of 12 children, Chuikov had risen, through sheer ability, to become a regimental commander in the Russian Civil War aged only 19. Surviving Stalin's purges of the army because of his youth, he had commanded the 4th Army in the Soviet invasion of Poland. He was the military attache in China when Operation Barbarossa began and was thus untainted by the setbacks of 1941. Recalled in early 1942, he commanded the 64th Army, delaying the German approach to Stalingrad, before assuming command of the defenders on 12 September, under the watchful eye of the local commissar, Nikita Khrushchev.

Though the original Fall Blau did not require the physical capture of Stalingrad – just domination of the area, which acted as a gateway to the Urals and controlled river traffic along the Volga – Paulus was now ordered to seize the city. Gradually, von Kleist's armoured thrusts towards the more important oil wells lost their momentum, as Hitler diverted some of his panzers back to Stalingrad.

The 6th Army commander reasoned that Stalingrad was too large to encircle, and on 14 September, he launched several ferocious assaults to reduce the city to smaller blocks he could defeat piecemeal. Chuikov had insufficient manpower to counterattack, but determined to defend doggedly, destroying as much of Paulus's war machine as he could while his defenders were overwhelmed.

Military history teaches us that attackers should outnumber their opponents by at least three to one. The same logic demonstrated that determined defenders will inflict a large number of casualties on their enemies; and so it proved.

## Shells and snipers

As Paulus tried to capture the industrial areas in the north, ferry crossing points over the Volga, and the high ground of 'Hill 103' (known as Mamayev Kurgan to the Soviets), German unit strengths plummeted. On the first day, six battalion commanders died, and over the ensuing days many irreplaceable young infantry officers were caught by shells or succumbed to snipers. This was the real tragedy of Stalingrad for Germany: a generation of trained leaders perished in a few months. In October, a panzer officer had

## THE MILITARY LEGACY

### How Stalingrad changed the face of war for ever

Stalingrad set the agenda in terms of terminology and tactics for urban warfare, and the drawn-out battles for Monte Cassino and Berlin were seen and reported in similar terms to their Soviet predecessor.

Allied (and later Nato) doctrine emphasised the need for a battle drill required of attackers and defenders to understand the complex equipment they would need, the high casualties they could expect to sustain and how overwhelming artillery support was highly desirable to crush strongpoints and minimise casualties. Certainly, Bernard Montgomery learned to concentrate hundreds of his guns into AGRA (Army Groups Royal Artillery).

As a result of Stalingrad, the Soviets came to rely on large numbers of truck-mounted Katyusha rocket launchers as well as traditional cannon in their great offensives, and called artillery the 'Red God of War'. The battle also haunted Nato military planners during the Cold War when it was assumed that a Warsaw Pact steamroller would head westwards and trigger urban warfare on a Stalingrad scale. The lessons of 1942–43 were studied and revised, and much time devoted to replicating fighting in built-up areas (FIBUA) in Cold War exercises. Yet both sides feared the mass battle casualties from this kind of encounter, for Stalingrad had cost the Germans over 750,000 men and the Soviets over a million killed, wounded or taken prisoner.



1943: The Wehrmacht lost over 750,000 men

## 1942-43 The battle of Stalingrad



**Street-fighters** A German 6th Army patrol advances among the ruins of the city, October 1942.  
"Stalingrad is no longer a town," wrote one panzer officer. "Animals flee this hell... only men endure."



**Hell or high water**  
Soviet backup arrives  
across the Volga river



**The 'ditherer'** German commander General Friedrich Paulus discusses tactics with colleagues at Stalingrad. He preferred to direct his troops from behind the front line and did little to alleviate their suffering as the tide turned against them.



**Captured** German PoWs march in line in Stalingrad, 1943. Of almost 100,000 taken prisoner, only 5,000 ever returned to Germany

recorded: "Stalingrad is no longer a town... Animals flee this hell; the hardest stones cannot bear it for long, only men endure."

By early November, Paulus controlled nearly 90 per cent of the city and had destroyed almost three-quarters of Chuikov's army, yet those left alive clung to the west bank of the Volga and refused to submit.

Unlike Paulus, Chuikov's dogged personality certainly inspired his troops: all ranks knew they were to hold their positions or die in the attempt. He had anticipated house-to-house fighting, built strongpoints along the major streets the Germans would have to use, and prepositioned his artillery to strike at the Wehrmacht's likely concentration areas. While the secret police were instructed to shoot anyone attempting to withdraw, Chuikov reinforced this 'last man, last bullet' mentality with his own proclamation: "There is no land past the Volga."

Yet before Paulus had even arrived, the Stavka – the Soviet high command – had determined to use Chuikov and his 62nd Army as a "tethered goat", attracting the Germans to their prey, then surrounding them with even larger forces. Unaware of this, and fed by Paulus's optimism (he was commanding from far outside the city), Hitler announced on 8 November: "I want to take it, and you know, we are being modest, for we have got it!"

However, the Führer had lost sight of

his strategic objective – oil – in favour of a personal struggle with Stalin through the town that bore the latter's name. The place had no strategic value in itself, and in drawing such exaggerated attention to the battle, Hitler was setting himself up for a fall of catastrophic proportions, from which his Reich would never recover.

The Soviet counteroffensive, Operation Uranus, began on 19 November, when six armies attacked from the north, targeting the weaker Romanian Third Army, and secured Paulus's northern flank. Within hours, Paulus's front was in tatters as the attack sliced far behind the German lines.

A day later, three more Soviet armies assaulted, this time from the south; again, the stiletto of attacking forces drove deep

## BOTH SIDES FOUGHT THEIR 'RAT-WAR' IN STALINGRAD'S STINKING GERM-RIDDEN CELLARS, WHERE COMRADES TUSSLED FOR SCRAPS OF FOOD

into the German rearguard. On 23 November, the two Soviet thrusts met at Kalach, west of Stalingrad. In doing so, they sealed Paulus's 6th Army into a kessel (a cauldron-shaped pocket), measuring at its greatest extent 80 miles wide.

Three personalities then conspired to condemn the 6th Army to a slow, agonising death, and forever shatter the aura of invincibility that had accompanied the Wehrmacht. First, Paulus dithered on a grand scale. At this stage, he should have lifted the siege and made attempts to escape, returning to fight another day – but the German general neither requested to break out, nor sought to impose his own will on the battle, becoming a prisoner of events.

Second, from the safety of Berlin, Hermann Göring intervened and promised that his Luftwaffe would supply the besieged army with all the food, fuel and ammunition it required. But Göring's slow Junkers Ju 52s were to provide less than half the minimum of 300 tonnes per day necessary for Paulus's men. They also took heavy losses themselves, and once the Pitomnik and Gumrak airfields had fallen, could do nothing.

Göring's unrealistic assurances inspired the third individual, Hitler, to insist that the 6th Army stand and fight where it was, rather than impugn his reputation.

When ground relief attempts by Field Marshal Erich von Manstein's Army Group Don, operating from north of the Crimea, were themselves threatened with another great Soviet encirclement, the Germans belatedly realised that the 6th Army was beyond rescue. Both sides fought their Rattenkrieg (rat-war) in Stalingrad's stinking, germ-ridden cellars; dreadfully emaciated survivors spoke of cannibalism and desperate fighting between comrades for scraps of food.

Paulus, though, remained well-fed and clean-uniformed, and initially failed to respond to Soviet offers of surrender terms. When he eventually requested permission to yield from Berlin on 22 January 1943, Hitler refused. Instead, on 30 January, he encouraged Paulus to continue fighting with the bribe of promotion to Generalfeldmarschall. But Paulus had had enough and surrendered the next day, singularly failing to alleviate the plight of his own men in any way throughout the struggle. In sub-zero temperatures, nearly 100,000 men marched into captivity, of whom fewer than 5,000 would emerge from the gulags a decade later. ■

Peter Caddick-Adams lectures at military staff colleges and universities around the world. His most recent book is *Sand & Steel: A New History of D-Day* (Random House Books, 2019)

The battle of Kursk

# THE BIGGEST TANK BATTLE IN HISTORY?



## Fire of war

A German Tiger I tank storms through a burning Soviet village



**Julian Humphrys**  
tells the story behind  
the battle of Kursk, an  
epic clash of men and  
tanks in which the  
Germans sought to  
recoup their losses  
on the eastern front

The summer of 1943 saw the German army mount a risky operation that made even Hitler nervous. "Whenever I think of this attack, my stomach turns over," he told a subordinate. Soviet advances after the battle of Stalingrad and subsequent German counterattacks had left a huge salient – or bulge – sticking out into the German-held territory around Kursk in the Ukraine. Hitler's plan, which was codenamed Operation Citadel, was to mount attacks from the north and south in order to cut off and surround the Russian troops in the salient. Success would also give the overstretched German army a shorter front line to man.

To build up the force to carry out this ambitious plan, the Germans brought in troops, tanks and planes from other sectors of the front. In the end, 70 per cent of all their tanks and nearly two-thirds of their aircraft in the east were committed to the operation. But would it be enough? Conventional military wisdom states that, to have a chance of success, an attacking force needs to outnumber that of the defender by three-to-one, but at Kursk the invaders had no such advantage. Despite their efforts, the Germans around Kursk were still heavily outnumbered.

Hoping that quality would defeat quantity, the Germans put their faith in their new tanks – medium Panthers, heavy Tigers and the monstrous 'Ferdinand' self-propelled guns (a huge gun fixed to a tank chassis). They hoped these cutting edge machines would overwhelm the Russian defences, creating a breakthrough that the rest of their armoured force could then exploit.

#### Russian intuition

But the Russians were ready for them. The salient had always seemed the obvious place for the Germans to attack, and Russian intuition was confirmed by intelligence passed to them by their western allies.



**Heavy metal** The Soviets' anti-tank guns – seen here on wheels – were less effective than hoped



## KEY PLAYERS

Be  
lion troops  
and 4,200 aircraft

### FIELD MARSHAL ERICH VON MANSTEIN



Commander of the southern German pincer. He had been key in the defeat of France in 1940 and had stabilised the German front at Stalingrad, earlier in 1943.

### FIELD MARSHAL WALTER MODEL



Commander of the northern German pincer. Hitler thought Model – nicknamed the 'Führer's Fireman' – one of his best generals. Model committed suicide at the end of the war.

### GENERAL NIKOLAI VATUTIN



Soviet commander of the southern sector of the Kursk salient. He was mortally wounded in an attack by Ukrainian nationalists in February 1944.

### GENERAL KONSTANTIN ROKOSOVSKY



Soviet commander of the northern sector of the Kursk salient. He had survived arrest, torture and imprisonment during Stalin's purge of army officers in 1937.

In order to build up his forces and allow the new German tanks to join his army, Hitler delayed the push. The Russians used their extra time well, constructing some of the most formidable field defences ever put in place by a defending army. Before they could get anywhere near the Russian fortifications around Kursk, the attacking Germans would have to fight their way through miles of anti-tank ditches, mine-fields and barbed-wire entanglements all while doing battle with thousands of tanks and facing fire from the 25,000 guns the Russians had assembled in the area. In key places, there were anti-tank guns positioned every 10 metres.

The German attacks began in earnest early on 5 July and, almost immediately, it became clear that they had underestimated their Russian adversaries. A massive Soviet

counter-bombardment began shortly before the attack was due to start, confirming the Germans had achieved no surprise whatsoever, and the extensive field defences in their path ensured progress was painfully slow.

While it was true that the heavy German tanks often proved impervious to the Soviet anti-tank guns – one Russian soldier described how 45mm shells bounced off the Tiger tanks like peas – their tracks remained vulnerable to the anti-tank mines.

Another threat came from the Soviet soldiers, who ran forward with spare mines to place in the attackers' paths, or to throw grenades, Molotov cocktails and satchels of explosives at the advancing German tanks. Lacking a hull-mounted machine gun, the Ferdinands fared particularly badly, as they were unable to repel these primitive-but-effective infantry attacks.

### Rain or shine

The weather during the battle alternated between blazing heat and pouring rain, coating the combatants in choking dust on one day, then bogging them down in thick mud the next.

Inside the scorching tanks, heat exhaustion was commonplace as sweating crewmen struggled to load the tanks' guns with their heavy shells. Many debilitated Germans kept going by taking Pervitin. Nicknamed *Panzerschokolade* or 'tank chocolate' by the soldiers, these highly addictive pills contained methamphetamine, which helped

**ANOTHER THREAT CAME FROM THE SOVIET SOLDIERS, WHO RAN FORWARD WITH SPARE MINES TO PLACE IN THE ATTACKERS' PATHS**

# MEN, MACHINES AND MANOEUVRES

German plans and forces were no match for the Soviets' overwhelming numbers at Kursk

## PLAN OF ATTACK

The German plan was to pinch out the Kursk salient by attacking from the north and south. But stubborn Soviet resistance meant the Germans made only limited advances – shown in red on the map below.



## ACTION IN THE AIR

Kursk may be known for the size of its tank battles, but the clashes in the skies were also some of the largest in history. Both sides had assembled thousands of planes, which duelled in the air, attacked enemy airfields and swooped down to bomb and machine-gun enemy targets on the ground.

Though their orders were to concentrate on ground targets, the Luftwaffe initially took a heavy toll on the Soviet air force. But they were hampered by a lack of fuel and gradually the Russians gained air superiority. Soon they were bombing German airfields on a nightly basis.



Soviet attack aircraft, Illyushin II-2 Sturmoviks

## TANKED UP

Red Army soldiers head into battle on board their ferocious T-34s

▼ E The Germans' Mark V Panther is hurriedly tested ahead of combat

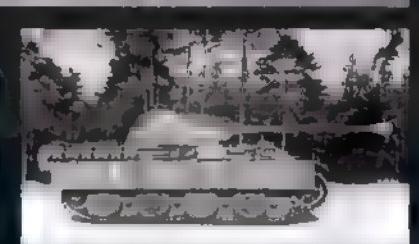


## TANK TROUBLES

The appearance of the Soviet T-34 tank in 1941 had come as a major shock to the German high command. The T-34 was superior to their own tanks and its effectiveness was only really restricted by the poor training of its crews.

Faced with this challenge, the Germans quickly began work to improve the design of their existing tank models and produced new tanks that could take on and beat the T-34. One of the most famous was the Mark V Panther. With better armour and a more powerful gun,

than the T-34, the highly useful tank was more than a match for its Russian enemy on the battlefield. But it was not without its problems. Rushed into service without proper testing, it could be unreliable and many Panthers broke down before they even reached the action.



## HITLER'S PRAETORIAN GUARD: THE WAFFEN-SS

The Waffen-SS was the military wing of the Schutzstaffel (SS) – the Nazi party's vast paramilitary organisation. Though under operational control of the German army, the Waffen-SS remained a separate entity, ultimately responsible to Heinrich Himmler, the Reichsführer-SS.

Normally identifiable by the lightning flashes or skulls on their collars, or their mottled camouflage combat uniforms, these soldiers held a fearsome fighting reputation at the time of the battle at Kursk. Three SS divisions fought there and many of the members captured by the Soviets were shot out of hand.

Soldiers of the German Waffen-SS, who instilled great fear in their enemies. Many German soldiers took an early form of crystal meth to help them cope with the strains of battle.



**Soviet power**

Red Army T-34 tanks pictured on the advance near Prokhorovka

them to fight fatigue and increased their self-confidence. More than 200 million pills were handed out during the war.

After four days' heavy fighting, the German attack from the north, led by Field Marshal Walter Model, began to run out of steam. His men had inflicted terrible casualties on the Soviets, having destroyed hundreds of tanks, but the Red Army's numerical advantage was just too great. No sooner had the Germans destroyed a unit of tanks than another appeared in its place. Soviet reserves of men and equipment seemed limitless. To make matters worse, the Germans were now coming under fire from ground-attack aircraft. After advancing a mere eight miles, the German drive ground to a halt.

Field Marshal Erich von Manstein's forces in the south ran into the same difficulties but, after a slow start, the pace of their advance began to pick up. On 7 July, it briefly looked as though von Manstein's troops might break through the main Soviet defence zone. But the Red Army rapidly deployed reinforcements and the German advance slowed once again. Even so, they pushed on and, by 11 July, the armoured divisions of the elite II SS Panzer Corps had reached the outskirts of the small town of Prokhorovka, 50 miles south-east of Kursk.

That night, as the German forces rested in a forest before attacking Prokhorovka, they heard an ominous sound - the rumble of hundreds of tank engines. The Soviets were preparing a counterattack of their own.

**Point-blank range**

The following day, the two sides clashed in what has often been described as the largest

## **SOME TANKS RAMMED EACH OTHER, OTHERS EXPLODED AS THEIR AMMUNITION CAUGHT FIRE, SENDING THEIR TURRETS FLYING INTO THE AIR**

tank battle in history. In fact, other battles had involved more tanks, but never before or since have so many armoured vehicles - over 800 in all - clashed at point-blank range.

That this was the case was down to the Soviets. They believed that if they fought at a distance they would simply be picked off by the German tanks' superior guns. This, they believed, was their only chance to get in close where their own guns would be more effective. As the German tanks emerged from the forest and moved into open ground, General Pavel Rotmistrov, commander of the Soviet 5th Guards Tank Army, gave the code word "Stal! Stal! Stal!" (Steel! Steel! Steel!) and 600 tanks charged towards the Germans.

Rudolf von Ribbentrop, the son of the German foreign minister, commanded a company of tanks in the battle, and he later described the scene:

"We halted on the slope and opened fire, hitting several of the enemy. A number of Russian tanks were left burning... I looked around as was my habit. What I saw left me

speechless. From beyond the shallow rise about 150–200 metres in front of me appeared 15, then 30, then 40 tanks. Finally there were too many to count. The T-34s were rolling towards us at high speed."

Soon the battle degenerated into a confused mêlée; tanks burned on all sides and all command was lost. Some tanks rammed each other; others exploded as their ammunition caught fire, sending their turrets flying into the air.

Crewmen escaped from their blazing tanks with their clothes on fire and desperately rolled on the ground to extinguish the flames. Others were less fortunate and died, screaming, in their blazing iron coffins. When dusk finally brought an end to the fighting, the two sides pulled apart.

The fields of the battle had become a tank graveyard; they were littered with burned-out hulks, some still pouring black, oily smoke into the air. Despite having lost some 200 tanks to the Germans' 50, the Russians remained unbeaten.

The following day, Hitler called off the operation. The Russians were already counterattacking north of Kursk and, with the news that the Allies had invaded Sicily, Hitler needed to withdraw troops from the front to defend Italy. When the Russians also began a counterattack south of Kursk, the exhausted Germans had no choice but to carry out a fighting retreat - they fell back 150 miles on a 650-mile front in two and a half months. The great German gamble had failed. ■

Julian Humphrys worked at the National Army Museum and is development officer for the Battlefields Trust

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After landing on the Italian peninsula, thousands of Allied troops made the advance north towards Rome. But, as **Matthew Parker** explains, their path to the capital would be blocked at Monte Cassino by dogged German resistance and unforgiving terrain

# HELL IN THE HILLS



**W**hen a lieutenant in the Scots Guards first clapped eyes on Monte Cassino at the start of 1944, he glumly noted: "Impregnable mountains, obviously with armies of Boche. Vast mountains lie in front, bleak and sinister."

His premonitions were to prove correct. The battle to take the hill was the bitterest and bloodiest of the western Allies' struggles with the German Wehrmacht on any front of the Second World War. In fact, many Germans compared it with the vicious battle of Stalingrad the previous year.

Monte Cassino lies 80 miles south of Rome in a region characterised by fast-flowing rivers and high mountains. It rises up from the narrow valley of the Liri river. Towering over the entrance to the valley is the monastery of Monte Cassino, its huge walls perched on the top of a spur that overlooks the valley below, where rivers

## CASSINO WAS THE BITTEREST OF THE WESTERN ALLIES' STRUGGLES WITH THE GERMANS ON ANY FRONT

form a natural moat. This natural strategic stronghold was where the German commander, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, chose to make his stand against the Allies advancing from the south.

The Cassino Massif on which the monastery stood was the key position in the German's Gustav Line, the system of interlocking defences that ran all the way across the narrowest part of Italy. The Germans had been defending the mountains south

of Cassino fiercely enough to exhaust the attackers, but at the Gustav Line, Hitler had decreed, there would be no more retreat in Italy. There had been plenty of time to prepare the defences; Kesselring was confident that "the British and Americans would break their teeth on it".

The Allies dominated sea and air, and had an overwhelming superiority in tanks, but hostile terrain and terrible weather made such advantages useless. The line could only be broken by infantry, therefore, and the battle would be man-to-man, fought with grenades, bayonets and bare hands. The attackers were aware of the strength of the Cassino position, and to revitalise a stalling campaign, planned an amphibious landing around 50 miles beyond the Gustav Line at Anzio. An offensive at Cassino by Lieutenant General Mark Clark's multinational 5th Army would draw the Germans' strategic reserves away from the landing area and then, it was hoped, break through to meet up with the amphibious force. ▶

**Through the rubble**  
Allied soldiers advance through the ruins of Cassino in 1944. The Italian town saw some of the fiercest fighting of the war



## 1944 The battle of Monte Cassino

In front of Cassino, the Germans had blown dams on the river Rapido and the entire valley was a quagmire. In addition, much of the Allies' air support was grounded by foul weather. But the attack had to proceed quickly, not only to satisfy pressure from London and Washington, but also so that the landing craft could be returned to Britain for the Normandy invasion. While the French and British drove forward on either flank, Clark's 36th 'Texas' Division would smash its way up the Liri valley.

River crossings are a recurring nightmare of the Cassino story. To the south of Cassino the Garigliano runs to the coast. Here, two British divisions started crossing on the moonlit night of 18 January. When Royal Inniskilling stretcher-bearer Jack Williams arrived at his crossing site, all was quiet. "We thought we were going to get over with no trouble at all," he later recalled. The first company started. "No gunfire, no shellfire; and then we went to get over – A Company – everything happened. Mortars, 88s, machine-gun fire, a really heavy stonk. The effect was pandemonium, really. Everybody was flapping and running about, trying to get in the boats, trying to get over."

Williams managed to get across in one of the eight-man boats, but soon all but one of the battalion's 12 craft were damaged. There were direct hits on crowded boats and others overturned, throwing their heavily laden occupants into the icy water. Some loosened their kit and managed to wriggle out and swim to the bank. Others sank like a stone to the bottom. Williams's sergeant told him the next day that as he was swimming, he could feel hands desperately grabbing at his feet from below.

"We got out of the boats," Williams continued, "and straight away we had to get



up to our objective. We couldn't hang about on the bank, really. We could hear the shouts and screams of the people there who were thrashing about in the water, who had been hit. It was a bit of a do at the time and everyone was panicking."

Those British soldiers who made it struggled through a massive minefield towards high ground. The German high command were concerned enough to move their reserves south, clearing the way for the Allies' landing at Anzio. Upstream, Americans trying to cross the Rapido in front of the Liri valley met with total disaster.

Even before they reached the river, many troops were killed or injured by mines and artillery fire. Carrying heavy boats in the darkness over soggy approaches to the river, some of the men – many of them 'green' replacements – panicked or quit. Those who reached the river found utter confusion. Rifleman Buddy Autrey remembered how his boat was swept downstream. The men inside, paddling furiously, were thrown into the river as the boat capsized. Although weighed down with equipment, Autrey tried to help a young private who was struggling

to stay above the water: "Our gear got wet and pulled us under," Autrey later recalled.

"I had to let go of the young man and he drowned... eight of 12 of us drowned and four swam to the German side." Wet, cold and without weapons, the four men tried without success to shout back over the river to the Allied side.

Those who made it across were pinned down by strong German defences and efforts to reinforce them failed. After two nights, the battle was over and the only Americans on the Cassino side of the river were now prisoners. It had been entirely one-sided. The 36th Division's fighting strength was gone; US newspapers described it as the worst disaster since Pearl Harbor.

### Continuing offensive

The Anzio landings were virtually unopposed, but Clark had to keep attacking at Cassino to break through to the beachhead before the Germans could counterattack. While urging French north African divisions north of Cassino to keep up the pressure, he ordered his 34th Division to seize the town and monastery. Progress was slow, until a thick fog allowed GIs to slip past German positions and secure high ground behind the abbey. A week of fierce fighting followed as Americans tried to push along the ridge behind the monastery, while the Germans counterattacked hard.

"There was never a time that we were free of intermittent or heavy mortar fire," recalled US infantryman Don Hoagland. "We took lots of counter-attacks... almost always at night and they came in quietly to get as close as they could. All of a sudden there's bodies moving out there in front of you. Every night there would be another attack... eventually it's fatigue that hits you as much as anything."

## TIMELINE The Italian campaign, 1943–45

### 9 September 1943

Landing of the main Allied invasion force at Salerno. After five days of fierce fighting, the Germans, having inflicted severe casualties, start a slow withdrawal to the north.

### 1 October 1943

Naples falls to the Allies. Comprehensively smashed and looted by the Germans, the city is full of starving civilians. A typhus epidemic ensues and is followed by a severe outbreak of gonorrhoea.

### 13 October 1943

Italy declares war on Germany. Due to a shortage of equipment, the Italian army does little fighting, but performs valuable portering duties for the Allies.

### 17 January–9 February 1944

The first battle of Cassino: British X Corps cross the Garigliano; US 36th Division is massacred on the Rapido; US 34th Division attacks the town and Cassino Massif; French north African forces break the Gustav Line north of Cassino.

### 22 January 1944

Anzio landing. US 6th Army gets ashore successfully, but digs in rather than pushing on to the Alban Hills. The beachhead is quickly sealed off by German forces.

### 15–18 February 1944

The second battle of Cassino: the monastery is bombed, followed by attacks by 4th Indian Division on Monastery Hill and by the Maori battalion of 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division on Cassino railway station. Both fail.

As much as enemy fire, it was the conditions that wore out the attackers. On 4 February the weather worsened and heavy snow began to fall, increasing the misery of men already soaked by freezing rain. Mortar fire kept the men from sleeping as well as causing casualties. "You'd lay down at night in your shallow hole," remembered Hoagland, "and if you had a couple blankets you put one down in the wet hole, laid down, and pulled a wet blanket over you. That's the way you slept."

When men of the 4th Indian Division relieved the remnants of the US force on the Cassino Massif, even hardened veterans were shocked. Bodies lay around in various states of mutilation and many survivors were too numb with cold and cramped from sheltering behind low stone walls to be able to walk. The elite British and Indian soldiers were brought over from the 8th Army to "finish the job".

Speed was of the essence as intelligence indicated a massive German counter-attack on the Anzio beachhead was planned to begin on 16 February. Originally intended to help the attackers on the Gustav Line, the operation was now dictating the timing of operations at Cassino. The Anzio tail was wagging the dog.

#### Bombing the monastery

On 15 February the ancient monastery of Monte Cassino was attacked by a huge force of heavy bombers. As well as handing the Germans a propaganda coup, the bombing was a tactical error. Because of difficulties in reaching the isolated mountain, the Allies did not have troops ready to follow up.

The Germans, who had not been occupying the monastery, now moved into the ruins, which provided an ideal defensive position. When British troops of 4th Indian



**Under siege** Beneath the hilltop Benedictine monastery, Cassino comes under heavy shelling in March 1944 as the Allies launch another offensive in an attempt to drive out the Germans stationed in the town

## BY THE END OF THE ATTACK, TWO ELITE ALLIED FORMATIONS HAD BEEN DECIMATED FOR NO GAINS WHATSOEVER

Division eventually moved forward that night, they were driven back. The following night a larger force tried again. "The Sepoys went in like tiger cats," reported an eyewitness, "but the hillside, the barbed wire and fierce defensive fire were too much for them. There were many casualties." In the Rapido valley, the Maori battalion of the newly

arrived 2nd New Zealand Division stormed the railway station but were unable to hold it against German tanks. By the end of the 2nd's battle, two elite Allied formations had been decimated for no gains whatsoever.

As predicted, the Germans launched a massive attack on the Anzio bridgehead on 16 February. This failed by a whisker but General Harold Alexander, the supreme Allied commander, ordered his men to execute another attack at Cassino. This time, New Zealand troops would capture the town from the north while the Indian Division made an attempt on the monastery from its eastern slopes. But the weather intervened in matters once again and the men were kept waiting for three weeks in their forward positions.

When the go-ahead was finally given on 14 March, another massive force of aircraft appeared overhead. Cassino, heavily

**15–23 March 1944**  
**The third battle of Cassino:** Cassino town is carpet bombed. New Zealand forces and the 4th Indian Division attack the town and the monastery. Eventually two-thirds of the town is in Allied hands, but the road to Rome remains blocked.

**11 May–5 June 1944**  
**The fourth battle of Cassino:** A massive artillery bombardment heralds an Allied attack from Cassino to the sea. The monastery is occupied by a Polish patrol on the morning of 18 May.

**4 June 1944**  
American troops arrive in Rome following Clark's decision to enter the city rather than seal off the escape of German 10th Army. He parades through the city the next day.

**4 August 1944**  
German forces withdraw from Florence and start taking up positions on the Gothic Line. French forces and US VI Corps are removed from Italy for landing in southern France.  
**Offensive in Italy stalls.**

**20 October 1944**  
Winter weather halts operations south of Bologna until the final Allied offensive starts on 5 April 1945.

**29 April 1945**  
German commanders in Italy ask for an armistice. This becomes effective on 2 May.

## BACKGROUND TO THE BATTLE



The Mediterranean, November 1942 – September 1943

"Marshall absolutely fails to realize what strategic treasures lie at our feet in the Mediterranean and always hankers after cross-Channel operations. He admits that our object must be to eliminate Italy and yet is always afraid of facing the consequences... He cannot see beyond the tip of his nose and is muddled."

So wrote Sir Alan Brooke, the chief of the Imperial General Staff, effectively Britain's most senior soldier, of his opposite number in the US, George Marshall. At the Casablanca conference in January 1943, as the ring closed around Stalingrad in the east, western Allied leaders met to discuss the next move after the successful African campaign. The conference saw arguments between Britain and the US.

The resulting muddle and compromise reached its grim conclusion at Monte Cassino. The road that led to the climactic battles south of Rome in early 1944 started with the decision in July 1942 to commit sizeable American and British resources to north Africa. It had been agreed there were not enough landing craft for a cross-Channel invasion that year. There were also insufficient US soldiers trained and in Europe. Instead of letting existing forces stagnate, it was thought best to use them to clear north Africa and do something to help out the hard-pressed

Soviets. Roosevelt was determined there should be American troops fighting Germans somewhere as soon as possible. In November, against the wishes of US military leaders, the president agreed to Operation Torch, landings by Americans and British along the north-west coast of Africa. Montgomery's 8th Army, following its victory at El Alamein the previous month, attacked from the east.

### GHOSTS OF THE WESTERN FRONT

Marshall had opposed the north African operation as a dispersion of effort. He favoured heading to Berlin from northern France. Now, at Casablanca, he was suspicious that the British desire to strike at the 'soft underbelly of Europe' was motivated by imperial concerns. There may have been some truth to this but above all, the British were haunted by the ghosts of the western front a generation earlier. Churchill was determined to delay cross-Channel invasion until success in northern France was more assured.

For once, the British got their way and the Casablanca conference ended with commitment to the invasion of Sicily. If successful, this would give the Allies control of the Mediterranean, reopen the Gibraltar-Suez shipping lane and, they hoped, knock Italy, then allied to Germany, out of the war. It would

draw German troops south, away from the eastern front and France.

Disagreements continued at the Trident conference in Washington in May 1943. Churchill was forced to abandon his plans to "set the Balkans alight" but the Americans grudgingly allowed Allied planners to work out operations against Italy, Sardinia and Corsica. The Americans thought they had been duped as far as southern Europe was concerned, while the British remained fearful their ally would pull the plug on the Mediterranean theatre or worse, renege on the 'Germany first' policy in order to fight Japan. Lack of trust at the highest level was mirrored on the ground, where British commanders were scathing of US troops' fighting ability, while American generals despised of their ally's lack of attacking spirit."

### STANDING UP FOR RUSSIA

Presented with early progress during fighting in Sicily, and evidence of Italy's imminent collapse, the Allies worked on their plans for invasion of the mainland. Five days before the Sicily invasion, the Germans had launched their Kursk offensive, using nearly three-quarters of their available strength on the eastern front. There were real concerns that Russia would be knocked out of the war and negotiate peace with Germany.

It was felt that operations in Italy would tie down more enemy troops and an amphibious assault on Naples, which had good landing beaches nearby, was planned as the main attack. This was as far north as land-based fighter aircraft could provide cover for the beaches. Thus the Allied troops found themselves fighting their way up the narrow, mountainous Italian peninsula – perfect defensive terrain. "We have a great need to keep continually engaging them," Churchill was urging at this time. "Even a battle of attrition is better than standing by and watching the Russians fight." The fighting, redolent of the worst moments of the First World War, reached its climax at Cassino where over 100,000 Allied troops were killed or wounded for no other purpose than to tie down German troops. This was achieved, but the cost must make the victory at Cassino a Pyrrhic one.



**Holding the line** German Fallschirmjäger (paratroopers) defend the monastery at Cassino

fortified by the Germans, was to be flattened by wave after wave of bombers.

The town was being held by about 300 men of the German 1st Parachute Division. "More and more sticks of bombs fell," one reported. "We now realised that they wanted to wipe us out... The sun lost its brightness. An uncanny twilight descended. It was like the end of the world... Comrades were wounded, buried alive, dug out again, eventually buried for the second time. Whole platoons and squads were obliterated by direct hits... Scattered survivors, half crazy from the explosions, reeled about in a daze... until they were hit by an explosion."

Although the town "looked as if it had been raked over by some monster comb and then pounded all over the place by a giant hammer", enough of the elite defenders survived to fight back as New Zealanders picked their way over the rubble and into the town. There followed some of the most vicious fighting of the campaign. "Every method was allowed," recalled one paratrooper. "There was basically the rule 'you or me'." On the mountain behind the town, a medieval-style siege was taking place around an old castle, as Indian troops tried to force their way up hairpin bends to the monastery.

After six days the New Zealanders had failed to clear the town and open the way to the Liri valley, and the monastery remained in German hands. The paratroopers, now known as 'The Green Devils of Cassino' had pulled off a remarkable feat. "Unfortunately we are fighting the best soldiers in the world," lamented Alexander. "What men! I do not think any other troops could have stood up to it perhaps except those para boys." Their success impressed not only the Allies. In Germany, it had even greater impact. A secret report of the SS Security Service stated that: "The progress of the fighting in Italy is the only thing at the moment that gives us reason to hope that 'we can still manage it'. It has demonstrated that we are equal to far superior adversaries." The monastery of Monte Cassino had



**Sifting through the rubble** Soldiers search a bombed-out house for German snipers

assumed a symbolic importance of German resolve and skill.

#### **The bitter end**

It was nearly two months before Alexander attacked again and at last some of the lessons of the previous five months seemed to have been learned. This time, there would be no rushed schedule. Instead the Allies were content to wait until they had a massive superiority in numbers and the ground dried out enough to deploy their armour.

On 11 May, a huge bombardment started as Allied troops attacked all the way along the 20-mile front from Cassino to the sea. For the first 24 hours the outcome hung in the balance. A Polish force, made up of men deported by Stalin to Siberia, was beaten back, suffering appalling casualties; in the valley below, efforts failed to bridge the Rapido; to the south, American and French north African forces struggled to win their initial objectives. The next night British engineers, under constant fire, threw

a prefabricated 'Bailey' bridge over the Rapido as north African mountain troops of the French Corps broke through the mountains to the south of the Liri valley.

There followed a hard week of confused, bloody and attritional fighting. "We've attacked, attacked, attacked from the beginning," British corporal Walter Robson wrote despairingly to his wife. "We sat in holes and trembled. Hicky cracked the day before, now Gordon did... he scrambled in headfirst, crying, 'I can't stand it, I can't stand it. My head, my head.' And he clutched his head and wept. I wiped his forehead, neck and ears with a wet handkerchief and sang to him... When, when, when is this insanity going to stop?"

With the French appearing out of the mountains to their right and faced by overwhelming numbers, the Germans began to retreat. The monastery was never captured. On the point of being surrounded, the weary paratroopers pulled out on the night of 17 May. The next morning a Polish patrol entered the building.

There was little sense of victory among the Allied troops as others took over the chase north. "Don't expect normal letters from me because I won't be normal for some time," Walter Robson wrote to his wife. "The papers are no doubt crowing about us and our achievements, but we aren't. We're bitter, for we've had a hell of a time... Everybody is out on their feet and one bundle of nerves... none of us feel any elation." ■

**"GORDON CRACKED... HE SCRAMBLED IN, CRYING, 'I CAN'T STAND IT - MY HEAD, MY HEAD.' I WIPED HIS FOREHEAD AND NECK AND SANG TO HIM"**

Matthew Parker is the author of *Monte Cassino: The Story of the Hardest Fought Battle of World War Two* (Headline, 2004). Details of his other books can be found at [www.matthewparker.co.uk](http://www.matthewparker.co.uk)

## Eastern rising

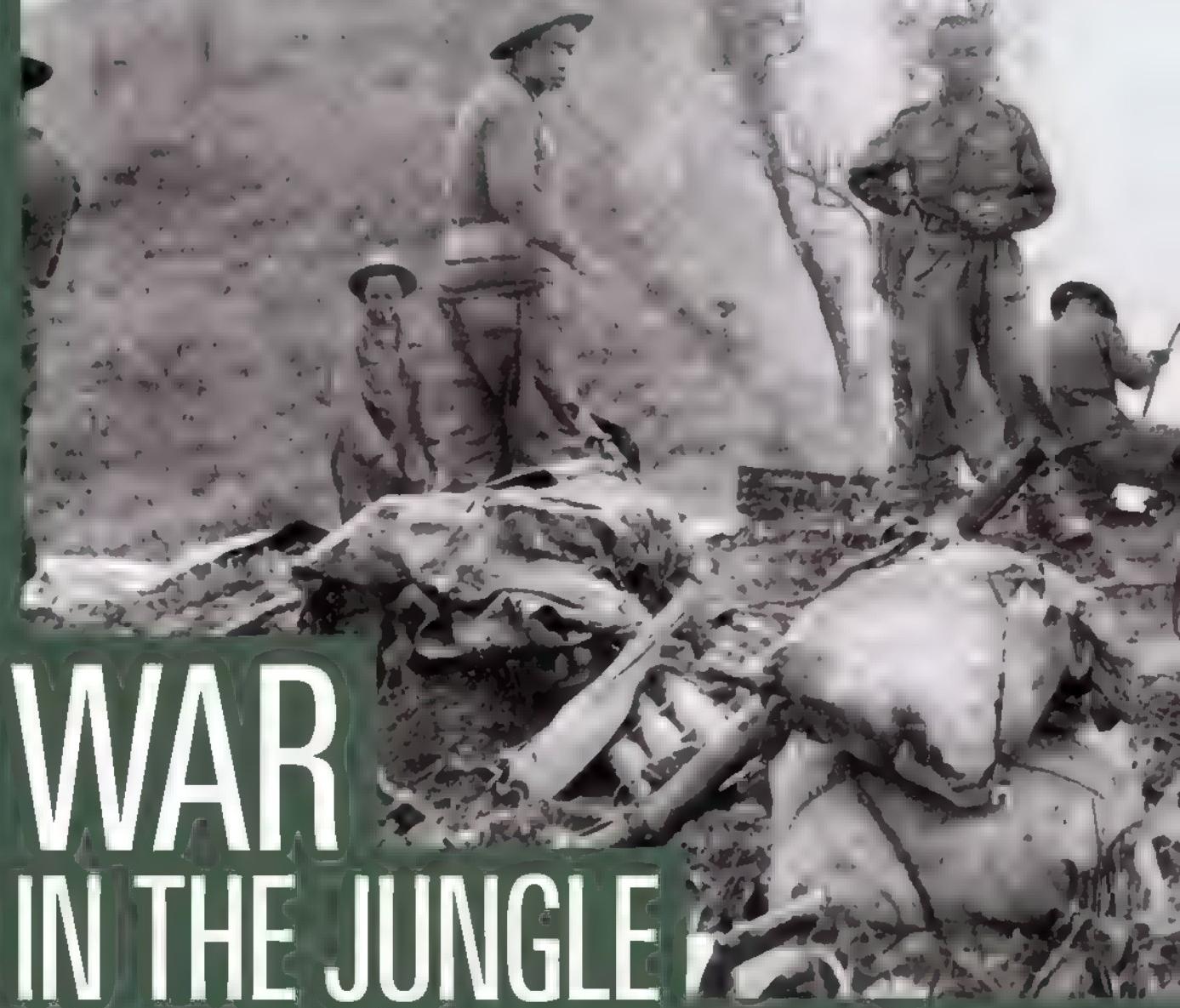
Chinese soldiers march towards Burma in 1943. After being forced out of Burma by the Japanese in 1942, the Allies regrouped in India where they repulsed a heavy assault by the forces of General Renya Mutaguchi in 1944 at the pivotal battles of Imphal and Kohima. Victory in those conflicts enabled the Allies to pursue the defeated Japanese into Burma which they finally regained in July 1945.





**Kings of the hill**

Men of the 10th Gurkha Rifles take a moment to reflect after winning the battle for 'Scraggy' Hill near Imphal. The hill formed part of the 5,000ft Shenam Saddle, which saw intense fighting.



# WAR IN THE JUNGLE



In March 1944, the Japanese struck north-east India, convinced the Raj would crumble. But the Allies' defence, built on the valour of British and Indian ground troops, would prove sterner than anticipated, writes **Robert Lyman**

**O**n 27 January 1944, British lieutenant colonel Leslie Mizen led a patrol across the Chindwin river near the Indian-Burmese border to investigate rumours that a build-up of Japanese troops was taking place along the east bank. The Japanese shouldn't have been there – in numbers at least. After creeping across countryside in the moonlight, the Allied troops laid an ambush on a track leading into a village. At about 10 o'clock the next morning, two Japanese soldiers were seen wandering along the path, chatting casually to each other. They were immediately cut down in a hail of rifle fire. The patrol seized a crop of documents from the crumpled bodies, and found the Japanese were from the newly arrived 15th Division – one of the fighting elements of the Japanese 15th Army.

Other patrols at the time were making similar, unsettling discoveries. A few weeks later, a patrol operating 20 miles south of the town of Tamu came across a Japanese car parked on the side of a track, its occupants studying a map. The patrol commander ran forward with his Sten gun blazing, killing the motorists before they could react. Inside the vehicle was a treasure trove of maps and plans detailing forthcoming operations up the Kabaw Valley. Together, the discoveries were building up a picture of rapid enemy reinforcement. They confirmed one unwelcome certainty: the Japanese were preparing to invade India.

In early 1944, Imphal, capital of the state of Manipur, was the centre of British defensive efforts in north-east India. It was to here that Major General Bill Slim's weary Burma



## Mountain patrol

An Allied 14th Army tank winds its way along the precipitous Imphal-Ukhrum Road

### KEY COMMANDERS

The struggle for supremacy during the 1944 conflict saw some charismatic characters go head-to-head



#### GENERAL RENYA MUTAGUCHI

Widely known as a fire-breather, Mutaguchi commanded the invading 15th Army. Although instructed otherwise, he harboured the illusion that his army could carry on from Manipur and advance into India proper, bringing the projected 'March on Delhi' to fruition. Unfortunately, at Kohima and Imphal, Mutaguchi was undone by his own hubris. He assumed the British would collapse quickly, and therefore that he didn't need to form an extensive logistical plan. He was wrong. Mutaguchi also distrusted his three division commanders, and they him.



#### GENERAL WILLIAM SLIM

Bill Slim has reason to be described as Britain's greatest general of the Second World War. It was largely thanks to his efforts that the 14th Army was prepared for war.

He combined a fresh sense of determination, skill and purpose with new techniques and equipment designed to raise morale among his Indian, African and British soldiers, enabling them to vanquish the Japanese. At Kohima and Imphal, his men did this decisively, as the Japanese streamed back in defeat along what they still call the 'Road of Bones'.



#### LIEUTENANT GENERAL KOTOKU SATO

A determined infantry commander, Sato was tasked with blocking the road between Dimapur and Imphal at the mountaintop town of Kohima. But his attacks at Kohima in April, and then his defensive battle in May and June, merely caused heavy Japanese casualties. He couldn't find an imaginative way of defeating the British, and so resorted to attrition and bloodshed. He hated Mutaguchi, and acted to prevent any further movement to Dimapur. Sato's withdrawal of his 31st Division in June was against Mutaguchi's orders.

#### MAJOR GENERAL JOE 'BLACK JACK' GROVER

John Grover commanded the famous British 2nd Infantry Division. A vastly experienced soldier, Grover was admired and liked by his men. His plan to defeat Sato at Kohima, following the lifting of the siege in April, was to launch three simultaneous brigade attacks, to the left, centre and right. It took two long, hard months to win the battle, after which Grover was relieved of his command. The suggestion is that Montagu Stopford, the Corps commander, considered his plan to be slower than necessary.

Corps had retreated following the Japanese invasion of that country in 1942. It was also from here that, in February 1943, Major General Orde Wingate launched the first of his famous deep-penetrating 'Chindit' raids behind enemy lines into Japanese-held Burma. The Japanese commander, General Renya Mutaguchi, feared a repetition of this type of attack, believing it would put Japanese control in north west Burma at risk.

He was right to be worried. The task of the British Army's 4th Indian Corps at this time was to secure Manipur's mountain barrier against Japanese incursions, and prepare for an offensive into Burma across the Chindwin in the spring of 1944. This was intended to support both the insertion of a second expedition by Wingate, and an advance towards Myitkyina in northern Burma by US general Joe Stilwell's Chinese and American forces. In anticipation of the offensive, Imphal was becoming the location of a growing array of supply dumps, hospitals, workshops and airfields. Every day, long convoys made their way 120 miles over the hills from Dimapur via the town of Kohima, while transport aircraft spiralled out of the skies, bringing in men and supplies.

But these forces did not mean that Manipur was adequately protected from attack – far from it. The huge swathe of jungle-covered mountains that surrounded



### **Slow progress**

The Royal Bombay Sappers and Miners try to maintain the Pale-Tamu Road

the state offered it little protection from an enterprising attacker. However, in 1944, the British did what they could, positioning scattered garrisons at Tamu in the south-east, Tiddim in the south and some of the mountain villages to the north and east of the plain where Imphal is situated. A tiny force garrisoned Kohima on the long, winding road back across the mountains to the city of Dimapur. Thirty miles south, meanwhile, a remarkable English anthropologist named Ursula Graham Bower was leading a group of Nagas – tribal people of north-eastern India – across 800 square miles of forest, commanding patrols and laying ambushes. Her raids were so successful she earned herself the sobriquet 'the Jungle Queen'. But even with these combined efforts, the key logistics hub at Imphal was far from secure.

### **A vicious hand-to-hand struggle**

Mutaguchi duly launched his massive attack into India in mid-March 1944, striking simultaneously from the south, south-east and east, in what Japanese nationalists and Radio Tokyo described as the 'March on Delhi'. Tokyo's ultimate intention was to seize India itself, the jewel in Britain's imperial crown. But first, it had to take Imphal.

The assault was spearheaded by fast moving columns, who carried their own rations and ammunition and did not need

## **JAPAN'S COMMAND ASSUMED THE ALLIED DEFENCE FORCES WOULD BE WEAKER THAN THEY WERE, AND FIGHT LESS ENERGETICALLY THAN THEY DID**

regular resupplying. It was to proceed along four major attack routes, converging on Imphal from all sides. The first was to approach Imphal from Tiddim in the south, advancing north along the road and destroying the resident 17th Indian Division on the way. The second would cross the Chindwin river and march along the short route through the mountains, flooding out into the Imphal Plain ready for battle. The third would penetrate the densely forested hills along little-known Naga trails to fall on Imphal

### **Jungle Queen**

Anthropologist Ursula Graham Bower, who led a group of Nagas on a number of daring raids



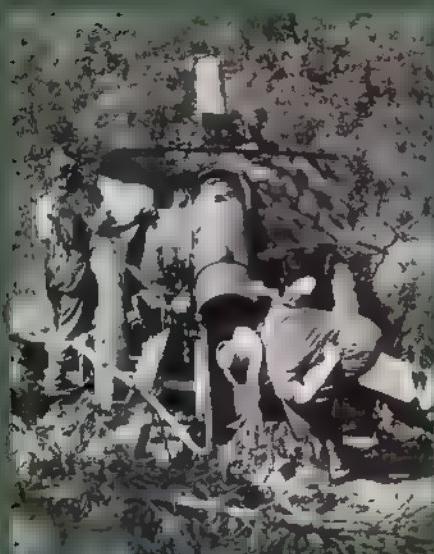
**Theatre of combat** Our map shows the border between north-east India and Burma in 1944

from the north, taking the British by surprise. Lastly, the fourth route would close the road from Imphal to Dimapur, seizing the key town of Kohima.

Digging in for the Allies to defend Manipur, and thereby all of India, was the 14th Army, commanded by Major General Bill Slim of Burma Corps fame. Beloved and trusted by his men, the scruffy, unpretentious Slim is credited by many with the psychological turnaround needed to ultimately defeat the Japanese in Burma after being forced out of the country in 1942. In 1943, he had been handed control of the 14th, a heterogeneous fighting force made up of units from all corners of the Commonwealth, particularly India, and east and west Africa. The exploits of this multinational assembly of troops were often overlooked in reports during and after the war, leading members to dub themselves the "Forgotten Army". But in 1944, Slim's mélange of units, many of them volunteers, were to prove their mettle in the most unanswerable way – and in the teeth of the monsoon season.

Japanese commanders had made the mistake of assuming that the Allied defence forces would be weaker than they were, and fight less energetically than they did. Mutaguchi expected victory in 20 days, whereupon a popular anti-British uprising would enable them to take all of India. But, unexpectedly, the British stood and fought. Equipped with aircraft, tanks and well-trained native and British units, the Allies turned back the enemy across the front – though it was a close-run thing. A vicious





**Heavy machinery**  
Indian soldiers examine a Japanese gun



Japanese troops crawl through the rubble as they advance with Anglo-Indian forces near Kohima



hand-to-hand struggle ebbed and flowed at all points of the compass around the Imphal Plain and at Kohima to the north-west, in flooded valley bottoms and on wet, jungle-matted hillside. No aspect of the battle went to plan from the Japanese perspective. From the very beginning, the 17th Indian Division provided some staunch resistance to Mutaguchi's troops along the Tiddim Road, withdrawing carefully all the way north to the outskirts of Imphal, where they held off Japanese attacks through to late July. Likewise, the mixed force of infantry and armour that worked its way up the mountain road was unable to break into the Imphal Plain. Slim craftily withdrew his forces into the hills above the plain, and engaged in an attritional slogging match with the Japanese attackers all the way through to August.

The experience of one unit was characteristic of the fighting. The men of C Company 2/1st Punjab held a bare peak at Litan on the night of 24 March 1944 – an experience the divisional record describes as “one of the most nerve-racking nights in the battalion’s history”: “Without a break, the battle raged through the night. Part of the company was overrun. Hand-to-hand

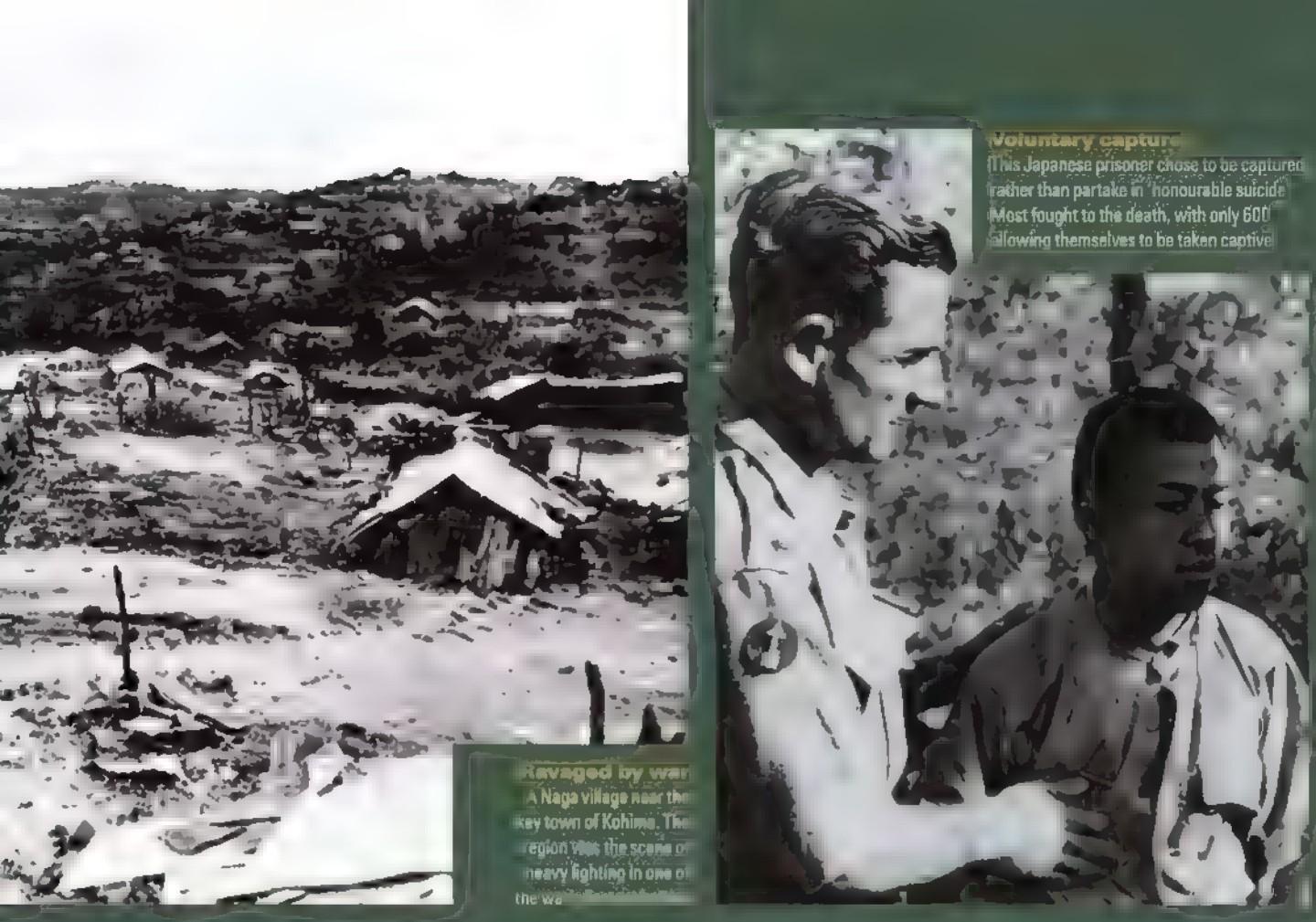
fighting was of the most ferocious. But the enemy was repulsed.” It was one story among hundreds, repeated across the rain-swept hills of the Manipuri and Assamese mountains over the four-month battle.

In the north, the third attack route had taken the Japanese 15th Division along secret forest tracks to fall on Imphal from the north. Again, however, they were repeatedly unable to break through its stoutly manned defences. Along the final route, meanwhile, General Kotoku Sato’s 31st Division managed to get to Kohima and block the road, but it trickled in slowly over a period of days, giving the British enough warning to reinforce the town and hold off the attackers. For a period of over two weeks, a small band of about 1,000 British and Indian troops successfully held off the relentless attacks of 15,000 Japanese. This, known as the siege of Kohima, has gone down as one of the most fiercely fought and significant battles in a theatre of war renowned for the bitterness and desperation of its fighting.

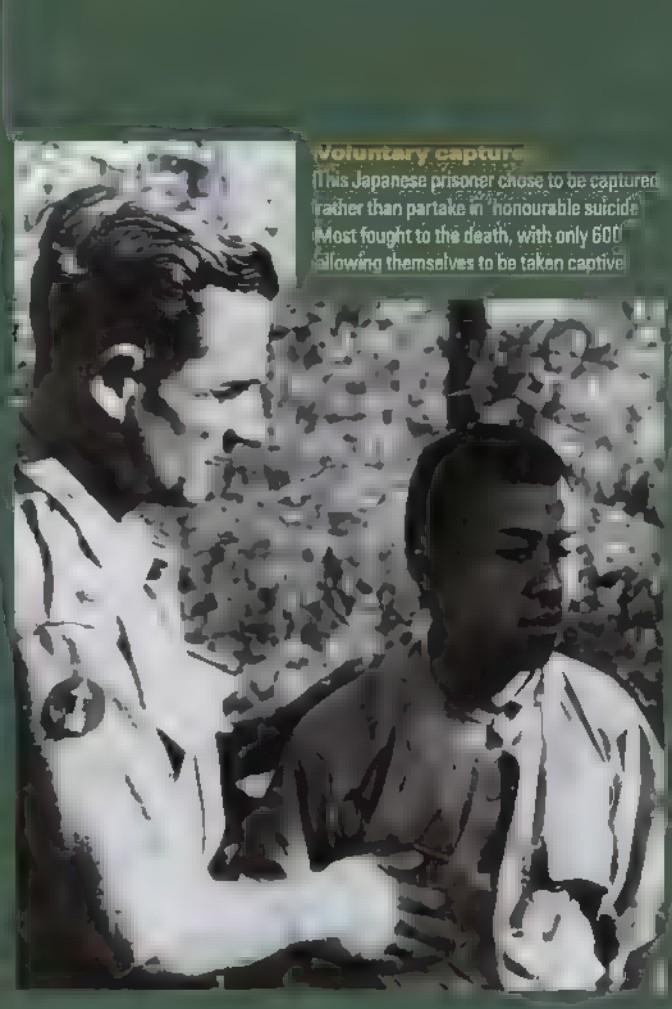
Once the British 2nd Infantry Division had relieved the defenders of Kohima in late April, the battle of Kohima began, as they



**Debt of gratitude**  
Field Marshal Archibald Wavell, Viceroy of India, thanks Naga villagers for their help defending Manipur against the Japanese



**Ravaged by war**  
A Naga village near the  
key town of Kohima. The  
region was the scene of  
heavy fighting in one of  
the world's bloodiest wars.



#### Voluntary capture

This Japanese prisoner chose to be captured rather than partake in 'honourable suicide'. Most fought to the death, with only 600 allowing themselves to be taken captive.

proceeded to eject the whole of Sato's division – grievously lacking in food and ammunition – from the positions they had created in the hills around the town. The Japanese, true to their beliefs about the dishonour of surrender, fought to the death. The survivors retreated along a route the Japanese called the 'Road of Bones' – gruesome testimony to the thousands who died of starvation and disease (and a few to tigers and other wild animals) as they scrambled back through 120 miles of mountainous jungle to the Chindwin. By August, Mutaguchi's army was in tatters, with the remnants struggling to get back into Burma.

From the high hopes of spring and the 'March on Delhi', the Japanese had suffered a comprehensive defeat. Mutaguchi's entire command structure had disintegrated, with men and units left to fend for themselves in a life-or-death struggle to evade the clutches of the Slim's slowly advancing 14th Army. By the last day of July 1944, the battle for India was over. Of the 65,000 fighting troops who had set off across the Chindwin in early March 1944, 30,000 were killed in battle and a further 23,000 were wounded – a casualty rate of an unprecedented 82 per cent of combat forces, and 46 per cent of the total

## THE JAPANESE ATTACKED BRAVELY, EVEN FANATICALLY, BUT THE DEFENDERS STOOD THEIR GROUND TO PREVENT THEM GAINING A FOOTHOLD IN INDIA

15th Army. Only 600 Japanese allowed themselves to be taken prisoner – most of them too sick even to kill themselves. Some 17,000 pack animals also perished, and not a single piece of heavy weaponry made it back to Burma. The cost to the Allies, meanwhile, was more modest: British, Indian and Gurkha troops suffered 16,000 casualties at Kohima and Imphal, many of whom would recover under the 14th Army's medical care.

#### Mud, blood and sacrifice

What went so badly wrong for the Japanese? The Allied success hinged on better preparation and leadership. By early 1944, Slim's 14th Army had been strenuously retrained and prepared to withstand the physical and mental demands required in fighting the Japanese. When battle came, although locally overwhelmed at points – such as in the siege of Kohima – Allied troops stood firm and fought the enemy to a standstill in battlefields filled with mud, blood and individual sacrifice. The Japanese attacked bravely, even fanatically, but the defenders stood their ground to prevent them gaining a foothold in India. Kohima and the other battles around Imphal were primarily footsoldiers' battles, where the courage and dogged perseverance of ground



troops on both sides ultimately decided the struggle. The fighting skill and tenacity of the British and Indian soldiers of Slim's 14th Army were a significant reason for their success.

The taste of victory was key for the 14th Army and Bill Slim after the defeat in Burma, and gave them a newfound confidence that the Japanese could be beaten. "Our troops had proved themselves in battle the superiors of the Japanese," Slim commented with satisfaction. "They had seen them run." Victory at Imphal and Kohima allowed Slim to conduct an aggressive pursuit in Burma later in 1944, and by mid-1945 to defeat Japanese forces for a second time, bringing about the total collapse of Japan's rule in Burma that year.

Somewhat understandably, the importance of Slim's victory was overshadowed at the time, and for decades afterwards, by the massive successes in 1945 that brought the Second World War to an end in Europe and the Pacific. But this lack of publicity does not disguise the fact that, objectively speaking, the battles in India in 1944 – epitomised in the fulcrum battle at Kohima – were epics comparable with Gallipoli, Stalingrad and other better-known confrontations, where

## LORD MOUNTBATTEN CALLED THE FIGHTING AT KOHIMA "ONE OF THE GREATEST BATTLES IN HISTORY... THE BRITISH-INDIAN THERMOPYLAE"

arrogant invaders were sent packing as ignominious losers. Lord Louis Mountbatten called the fighting at Kohima in particular "one of the greatest battles in history... naked, unparalleled heroism – the British-Indian Thermopylae".

The names of Kohima and Imphal may not be as renowned as these more storied, illustrious battles. And yet the sacrifice of Allied troops of the 14th Army is satisfactorily central to Remembrance Day services across the Commonwealth every year. As we pay tribute to the fallen, we read aloud the famous lines of the poet John Maxwell Edmonds:

*"When you go home,  
Tell them of us and say  
For your tomorrow,  
We gave our today."*

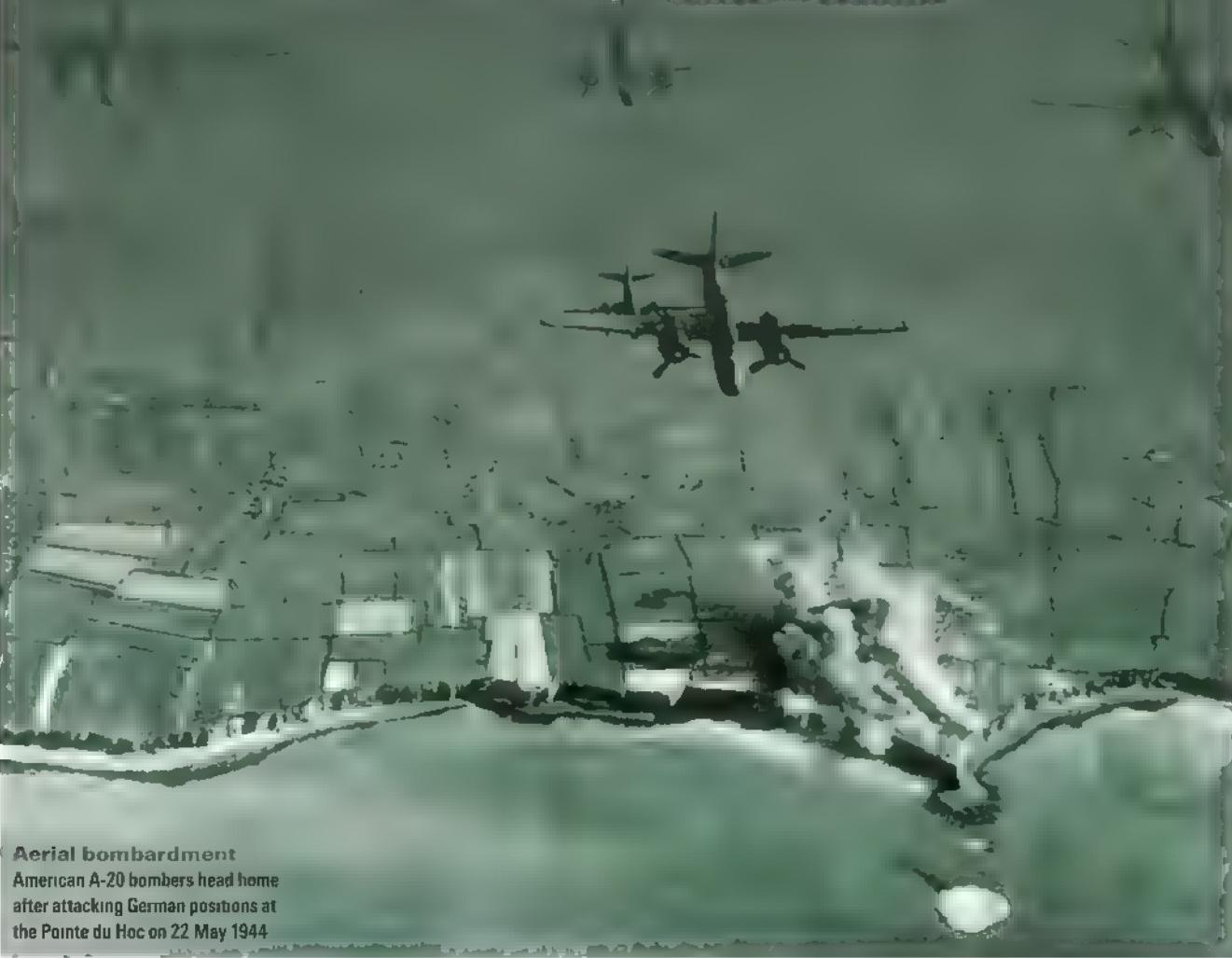
These words are taken from the 2nd Division memorial at Kohima, and were written to honour the soldiers who lie buried in those far-off hills, having given their lives in one of the most pivotal and hard-fought struggles of the war. ■

**Robert Lyman** is a military historian. His books include *Kohima 1944* (Osprey, 2010) and *Japan's Last Bid for Victory* (Pen & Sword, 2011)

**Key contribution**  
Indian troops of Bill Slim's 14th Army carry supplies forward. A tied unit. Their fighting skill and tenacity was crucial to the defence

# THE GREAT INVASION

Despite the wily misdirection and stacked-up firepower of the Allies, it took a brutal war of attrition amid the sunken lanes of northern France to crumble the German resolve, says **James Holland**



**T**hey had gone to war weeks before with fresh, blooming faces," noted one divisional commander but in four long weeks all that had changed. "Camouflaged, muddy steel helmets cast shade on emaciated faces whose eyes had, all too often, looked into another world. The men presented a picture of deep human misery." The troops in question were barely men at all, but rather the young soldiers of the 12th SS Panzer 'Hitlerjugend' Division, watched by their commander, Kurt 'Panzer' Meyer, as they pulled out of the battered city of Caen on 9 July 1944. Just over a month earlier, on 7 June, these same troops had joined the battle on D-Day plus one and, at the time, had been among the best-equipped and motivated divisions in the German armed forces. Coming face to face with the Canadians and British, however, they soon discovered the grim reality of fighting the Allies – in which their own shortcomings were brutally exposed by their opposition's superior firepower.

Planning for Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of Normandy, had begun the previous year, but was rapidly accelerated at the beginning of 1944, once the key appointments were made. The American general Dwight D Eisenhower, who had done well in the Mediterranean, was appointed supreme allied commander and set up SHAEF (the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force) in England in February. General Sir Bernard Montgomery was put in charge of land forces and, with a combined services inter-Allied planning team, began drawing up plans alongside his fellow service chiefs and their teams, Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay and Air Chief Marshal



### Trained from youth

Soldiers drawn from the Hitler Youth formed the 12th SS Armoured Division which was thrown into battle against the Allies on 7 June

Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory. Draft plans were approved in February and then presented in early April. There would be five invasion beaches and airborne forces would be dropped on the flanks of the front.

### Aerial support

The constraint on these plans was shipping, for although nearly 7,000 vessels were earmarked for the invasion, there were still nothing like enough landing craft to deliver the overwhelming superiority of men and materiel the Allies had built up in southern England. It was this that limited invasion plans to five beaches only. The challenge for the Allies was to ensure they built up a decisive materiel advantage before the Germans were able to reinforce the battlefield in the days and weeks that followed D-Day.

This was where air power, especially, came in. Throughout the winter of 1943–44, Allied strategic air forces had fought hard to hammer the Luftwaffe and clear the skies of enemy aircraft over much of north-west Europe. This was because the way to hamper the German ability to reinforce Normandy was by destroying their lines of communication: railways, marshalling yards, bridges, roads and radar stations. These required precision bombing, which in turn meant operating at lower heights. To do this effectively, the skies above needed to be clear of enemy fighters.

Fortunately, this vital prerequisite had been achieved by mid-April 1944. In the nine weeks leading up to D-Day, Allied air forces blasted targets in Germany, France and the Low Countries relentlessly, and with extraordinary skill and effectiveness. Some 197,000 tonnes of bombs were dropped on France alone. All bridges across the Seine were destroyed, while 76 of the 92 radar

## IN THE NINE WEEKS LEADING UP TO D-DAY, ALLIED AIR FORCES BLASTED TARGETS RELENTLESSLY AND WITH EXTRA- ORDINARY SKILL

AKG IMAGES

## TIMELINE How the Normandy campaign unfolded

**Mid-April 1944**  
Air superiority is achieved over north-west Europe by Allied air forces after a prolonged campaign that lasted through the preceding winter. Control of the sky is a prerequisite for the Normandy invasion.

**15 May 1944**  
The final Allied planning conference for the cross-Channel invasion to liberate the north of France takes place. Operation Overlord receives unanimous approval.

**6 June 1944**  
**D-Day unfolds.** After a 24-hour delay due to storms, almost 132,000 troops from Britain, the US, Canada and 10 other nations begin landing on the Normandy coast at around 6.30am. Further troops had already been parachuted in behind enemy lines.

**7–9 June 1944**  
**The 12th SS-Panzer Division counterattacks** on 7 June but is held by a small force of Canadians and the weight of Allied firepower. Two days later, the Panzer Lehr Division launches another counterattack but is also halted.

**19–21 June 1944**  
A great storm batters the Normandy coast for three days. The terrible weather delays the Allied build-up of reinforcement troops and equipment.

**26 June 1944**  
British forces launch Operation Epsom – the first major Allied offensive in Normandy. The next day sees the Americans capture Cherbourg.



### Bombing runs

A huge effort to clear the skies over France of enemy aircraft allowed Allied bombers to disable Germany's vital supply lines

ALAMY

#### 9 July 1944

Allied troops liberate the northern half of Caen after driving the occupying German forces across the river Orne.

#### 18–21 July 1944

The British launch Operation Goodwood to the east of Caen. The forces advance seven miles, breaking through the German defences and getting onto the Bourguébus Ridge.

#### 25 July 1944

The Americans launch Operation Cobra to the west of Saint-Lô and break through enemy lines. The Germans are now in full retreat.

#### 1 August 1944

General Patton's 3rd Army is activated after landing in Normandy. With the help of air support and armoured infantry, it drives quickly west towards Brittany and east towards the Seine

#### 7 August 1944

The Germans launch a counterattack, Operation Lützow. It is a failure. The Canadians launch Operation Totalize south of Caen

#### 21 August 1944

The battle for Normandy ends in Allied victory, 13 days sooner than Montgomery had initially predicted

stations along the Atlantic coast had been knocked out. The Germans would not be reinforcing Normandy in a hurry.

Brilliantly executed intelligence plans meant that, by the beginning of June, the Germans still had no clear picture as to where or when the Allies would be landing. Poor weather was a major concern for Eisenhower and his commanders, and led to a nerve-racking 24-hour delay, but Overlord was launched on 6 June, using a plan that was unanimously accepted and largely successful, even though not all of the D-Day objectives were achieved.

Fortunately for the Allies, Hitler had insisted on having personal authority on when the key 10 mobile divisions in the west could be moved. These units were among the best in the German armed forces and in a different league to the low-grade infantry divisions manning the coast. If the Allies were to be thrown back into the sea, it would be these armoured divisions putting in the hard yards. Only one was in Normandy at the time and the next nearest two were not given permission to move until after 4pm on D-Day. By then it was too late, and Allied air forces could roam freely and fire at anything they saw moving.

The 12th SS Division reached the front overnight and went into battle against the Canadians on 7 June. But rather than drive them into the sea, the SS-Hitlerjugend only managed to push around 800 Canadian infantrymen and a handful of tanks back a couple of miles, as Allied firepower began to kick in. An often-forgotten tussle, it showed that going on the attack in Normandy was not going to be easy – even for motivated SS troops bristling with weaponry.

The Panzer Lehr, the next German panzer division due to reach Normandy, was battered and bruised, and badly delayed in its fraught journey to the front, as it was relentlessly attacked by Allied fighter bombers. When it finally went into action on 9 June around the village of Tilly-sur-Seulles, it hit as much of a brick wall as had the SS-Hitlerjugend. In the days that followed, the Allies unquestionably won the battle of the build up. With very little Luftwaffe to hamper unloading, they were able to operate 24 hours of the day in a constant shuttle across the Channel. Incredibly, by 15 June, four airfields had been constructed within the bridgehead, and by 20 June there were around 12. This meant that Allied fighters, no longer needing to cross back to England to refuel and rearm, could operate almost constantly and stifle German supply lines even more.

A blow to Allied plans came on 19 June, however, when a three-day storm destroyed



more than 800 landing craft, halted unloading and disabled one of the two giant artificial 'Mulberry' harbours that had been built and towed across the Channel.

There were consequences of this intervention of nature. Montgomery had correctly recognised that to break through the rapidly coagulating German lines decisively, he would need to amass overwhelming force, but the storm had put back Allied build-up significantly. At the same time, cryptanalysts back in England had decoded enemy radio traffic showing that more panzer divisions were converging on the Caen sector and planning a coordinated counter-attack. Preventing this from happening was essential. As a consequence, General Miles Dempsey, the British 2nd Army Commander, launched Operation Epsom on 26 June short of three divisions and in bad weather, and therefore without air support. Despite this, the Germans were both pushed back and forced to throw fresh panzer units straight into the battle

in paltry numbers before they could concentrate their efforts.

### Monty's deception

Much has been made of the slow and apparently cautious approach of the Allies, and certainly by the middle of July, Eisenhower – facing pressure from his masters – was becoming increasingly impatient. Before the invasion, Montgomery had expected the Germans to retreat in phases, as they had done in north Africa, Sicily and southern Italy, and so had predicted a more rapid initial advance. This had been an entirely reasonable assumption, but events had turned out differently, because Hitler insisted on fighting as close to the coast as possible, even though that had kept his troops within range of off-shore Allied naval guns, and despite Rommel and others imploring him to allow them to fall back.

It was not Montgomery's fault that Hitler had insisted on a strategy that made little military sense. What's more, as Monty was well aware, fighting close to the coast worked to the Allies' advantage. Their lines of supply were shorter, the naval fire support was very helpful and it allowed them to grind the Germans down. In the time the Allies received one million replacement troops, the battered German units had been sent just 10,000.

The Allied way of war was to use as few troops as possible at the coalface. Even so, it was left to the infantry and armour to probe forward and goad the Germans to counterattack – something they did with Pavlovian predictability. The moment they did so, emerging from their foxholes and camouflaged hideouts, the full weight of

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### **Open ground**

British infantrymen move across the fields of Normandy towards Tilly sur Seulles



### **Rapid response**

The fearsome German Panther Ausf G tanks were rushed into action to halt the Allies' progress

## 1944 The battle of Normandy



### Reduced to rubble

Operation Overlord overwhelmed German forces in Saint-Lô with devastating air attacks that left the city in ruins



### Trail of destruction

The Germans paid a high price during the battle for northern France

Allied firepower came crashing down upon them with equally predictable casualties. This approach meant the Allies were throwing comparatively few men into the fray (infantry amounted to around 14 per cent of the 2nd Army and armour about 8 per cent) but those unfortunate enough to be in the front line suffered horribly. Whether units were fighting over the open country around Caen, or in the tight, narrow fields to the west, with their high hedgerows and sunken lanes, the chances of getting through unscathed were zero. The US 4th Division, fighting its way up the Cotentin peninsula, lost 100 per cent of its fighting strength in two weeks. Only the continuous flow of replacements kept it going. The commune of Cherbourg was captured on 27 June, while to the south, the Americans continued to batter the ridge-line north of the city of Saint-Lô. Collectively, the Allies were chewing up the enemy bit by bit. It just didn't look that way on the map.

Operation Goodwood was launched by the 2nd Army on 18 July to the east of Caen and drove towards the high ground of the Bourguébus Ridge, south-east of the city. Supported by a massive aerial bombardment, the armour-heavy attack managed to take the ridge and advance around seven miles, which was pretty much what Montgomery had expected. However, he had let Eisenhower and RAF Marshal Arthur William Tedder think it would result in a decisive breakthrough, aware that only with such expectations would he get the air support he wanted. There was no decisive breakthrough, but Goodwood had also kept the bulk of the panzer divisions rooted in the Caen sector, as Montgomery had intended – distracting them from the first major American offensive, Operation Cobra, which was due to follow.

With Saint-Lô finally taken on 19 July, US general Omar Bradley launched Cobra on 25 July, with heavy bombers in support. The Allies were to drop a staggering 72,000 100lb bombs in a narrow 1 x 4.5-mile area. The aim was to annihilate the enemy in front of them, but not turn the ground into a moonscape. Bradley wanted his armour to burst through quickly, without the hindrances the British had suffered negotiating bomb damage and craters in and around Caen.

Tragically, the smoke from the aerial bombardment drifted and over 100 Americans were killed by their own bombs, but not before the Germans had suffered 100 per cent casualties of troops within the bombing zone. It was enough to enable the infantry and the armour that swiftly followed to break the dam and burst through. Already

## THE FEW ROADS OF RETREAT LEFT TO THE GERMANS BECAME SCENES OF APPALLING CARNAGE AS FIGHTER BOMBERS PULVERISED THEM IN THEIR FLIGHT

fataally weakened, the entire German front opposite the Americans began to collapse on 26 July. The long weeks of attrition were over.

### The final collapse

With the Germans in full retreat, the Allied air forces had a field day, shooting up anything that moved. Long columns of carnage littered the countryside. On 1 August, General George S Patton's 3rd Army, which had been arriving over the previous weeks, was activated and sped south through the US 1st Army and on into Brittany. Two days before, on 30 July, the British had launched Operation Bluecoat in the centre of the Allied line, pushing the Germans back more than 20 miles in a matter of days.

The Germans were now in disarray. Rommel had been wounded on 17 July and Field Marshal Gunther von Kluge took over command in Normandy. Both he and his senior commanders were fully aware the battle was lost, but at this moment Hitler intervened again, insisting on a massed panzer counterattack to drive a wedge through the Americans. Operation Lüttich was launched on 7 August, although with nothing like the strength Hitler had ordered. Not a single one of the 1,000 Luftwaffe fighter planes promised to support it ever reached the battlefield. Most were hammered by Allied fighters as they tried to take off from fields to the south-west of Paris.

The Canadians, with British support, launched two more operations, Totalize and Tractable, south from Caen, as the US 1st Army held and then drove back the German counterattack and Patton's forces started to sweep eastwards from the south. The key town of Falaise fell around 17 August, and suddenly the Germans were fleeing, in danger of becoming encircled in the so-called Falaise 'Pocket'. The few roads of retreat left to them became scenes of appalling carnage as fighter bombers and Allied artillery pulverised them in their flight. The 'Corridor of Death' in the otherwise beautiful Dives Valley was witness to scenes of particular horror.

By the time the pocket was closed, just 50,000 Germans from two entire armies had escaped, and barely two dozen of some 2,500 armoured fighting vehicles that had been sent to Normandy. By any reckoning it was a rout, a stunning Allied victory, completed in a mere 77 days. Operation Overlord had achieved its objectives. □

**James Holland** is a historian, broadcaster and author. His latest book is *Normandy '44. D-Day and the Battle for France* (Bantam Press, 2019), which is accompanied by a three-part TV series



### The first captive

George Eidlothe, only 16 years old, was the first German prisoner taken by the Americans during their advance on the village of Marigny

# PART THREE

# 1944–1945

III The eastern front  
is like a house of  
cards. If the front is  
broken through at  
one point, all the rest  
will collapse III



US Army tanks, equipped  
with flamethrowers, burn  
the Japanese out of caves as  
they prepare for an infantry  
assault on Okinawa, 1945

# HITLER'S FINAL GAMBLE



#### Forest fire

Troops from Kampfgruppe Hansen of the 1st SS Panzer Division pictured in action against an American convoy of the 14th Cavalry Group at Poteau, 18 December 1944

In late 1944, the Nazis launched a massive counterattack in the west, aimed at bringing the Allied advance on Germany to an abrupt halt. **Peter Caddick-Adams** reveals why the ensuing conflict in the Bulge was hailed as "the greatest American battle of the war"



**N**estled deep in the Ardennes, overlooked by hills and woods, Hotton is an unremarkable Belgian town, sitting astride the river Ourthe. This sleepy cross-roads community, with its church, stone farmhouses and wooden barns, still bears a close resemblance to the 1940s settlement, although the scattering of modern buildings indicate that vicious fighting once occurred here.

Walk down the main street and you can picture the 5th Panzer Division racing through on their way to the river Meuse during the Saturday afternoon of 11 May 1940. Clattering down the cobbles from the east – young, keen and scenting victory – the black-clad German tank men easily captured Hotton's little bridge over the river Ourthe, despite attempts by Belgian pioneers to destroy it. At the same time, three miles to the south, other panzers belonging to a then-obscure major general named Erwin Rommel were splashing across a ford at Beffe. Within a matter of weeks, Hitler's rampaging forces subdued Belgian, French and British troops and, for the time being at least, won the war in western Europe.

Four and a half years later – at 8:30am on the winter solstice, Thursday 21 December 1944 – the panzers returned, following the same route, aiming again for Hotton's bridge. This time it was men from 116th Panzer Division, called the Windhund – the Greyhounds. And this is how they saw themselves: fast, sleek and straining at the leash to reach the Meuse, 24 miles away.

They were part of a spearhead of panzer divisions, assigned to the last major German attack in the west, codenamed Herbstnebel ('Autumn Mist'), though now better known as the battle of the Bulge. The campaign had begun at 5:30am on 16 December, when the foggy gloom of the Ardennes region of Belgium and Luxembourg was ripped apart by a deafening roar. To onlookers, the eastern horizon turned white, "as though a volcano had suddenly erupted or someone had turned a light switch on".

The sudden cacophony rolled from the pretty half-timbered town of Monschau in the north, along 80 miles of front, to the resort city of Echternach in the south. Woods were shredded, the earth trembled and the ground exploded in showers of stones and red-hot metal splinters. GIs cowered in their tree-trunk bunkers and stone houses, while every calibre of shell the Third Reich possessed was hurled at them. German infantry and hundreds of carefully husbanded panzers soon followed.

The plan was devised by Hitler personally, and first occurred to him as the germ of an



#### Cold war

An American M-10 tank destroyer advances along an Ardennes forest road. Freezing weather grounded Allied air fleets and hampered efforts to repel the German advance

idea even before the Allies had seized back Normandy from German forces. He briefed his generals on his concept on 16 September: three armies of newly raised infantry divisions, supported by tanks, would attack the Allies from the safety of that great system of pillboxes and strongpoints along Germany's western frontier, the Siegfried Line.

#### Dead of winter

The objective was both political and military. By aiming for the port of Antwerp, over 120 miles away, Hitler hoped to sever the Allies from their logistics, which would bring their forces to a halt as they ran out of fuel, ammunition and rations. He also hoped this shock would be enough to shatter Anglo-US military co-operation, allowing him to make peace with the western Allies on his terms, and concentrate on Russia. The timing was crucial: Hitler's troops were to attack in the dead of winter, when poor weather would ground the Allied air fleets.

Hitler's generals protested that the aim

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**Brutal bombardment**  
US soldiers, with a deceased comrade in the foreground, dig in on the edge of an Ardennes forest during the Nazi offensive



A. AMY MAP PAUL HENRY BATT/LEF ELO DES JN  
was too bold. Besides, they had neither the troops nor the supplies – especially the fuel – to maintain such an attack. Their protests were half-hearted: after the 20 July Stauffenberg plot (when a group of high-ranking German soldiers tried to assassinate Hitler), even objective criticism could be mistaken for treason. They were silenced as much by fear as by Hitler's insistence on deciding all the details himself. He refused to countenance any alterations to his plans and became obsessive about security. Hitler apprised the divisional commanders of their roles personally only on 11–12 December, leaving no time for reconnaissance, training or rehearsals. More junior commanders had just 24 hours' notice.

Orders were transmitted in person by officer courier, meaning that the Allied codebreaking operation at Bletchley Park had little knowledge in advance of the impending storm. Thus, the Allies were caught totally by surprise when 200,000 German soldiers, supported by more than

**Hitler hits back** Our map shows the 'bulge' that the German offensive punched into Allied lines during the winter of 1944–45. However, it fell a long way short of Hitler's overall objective of reaching the Belgian port of Antwerp and severing Allied supply lines

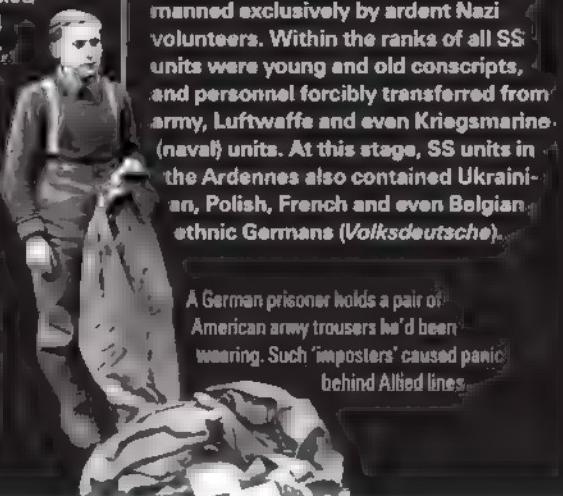
# THREE MYTHS OF THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE

Not everything you've read about Hitler's great Ardennes offensive is necessarily true...

## Allied lines weren't infiltrated by hundreds of English-speaking German commandos

Much has been made of bands of German commandos – speaking fluent English, wearing American uniforms and driving jeeps – causing mayhem behind US lines. In fact, very few spoke convincing English and only a small proportion infiltrated Allied lines: just 44 were dispatched between 16 and 19 December, with all but eight returning.

What hasn't been exaggerated, however, is the great panic that these imitators caused among Allied troops. Spooked GIs tended to shoot first and ask questions later, causing hundreds of deaths through fratricide. Meanwhile, countless Germans were executed in the belief they were commandos, when in reality they carried captured clothing simply to stay warm.



A German prisoner holds a pair of American army trousers he'd been wearing. Such 'imitators' caused panic behind Allied lines

## Fanatical Nazis didn't spearhead the assault

The SS undoubtedly played a prominent role in the Ardennes offensive – the 6th Panzer Army, which attacked the northern flank of the Ardennes sector, included four SS tank divisions and was commanded by Hitler's former bodyguard, Oberstgruppenführer Josef 'Sepp' Dietrich. However, by the beginning of 1945, SS units were no longer manned exclusively by ardent Nazi volunteers. Within the ranks of all SS units were young and old conscripts, and personnel forcibly transferred from army, Luftwaffe and even Kriegsmarine (naval) units. At this stage, SS units in the Ardennes also contained Ukrainian, Polish, French and even Belgian ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*).

## The brilliant German tank man wasn't quite so brilliant after all

The heavily decorated Waffen-SS officer Joachim Peiper has traditionally been portrayed as a model tank commander for his drive and willingness to take risks during the Germans' rapid advance at the start of the battle. In fact Peiper's performance was, at best, lacklustre. He made little progress on 16 December (the opening night of the offensive) and instead of pushing on, rested overnight before resuming his advances.

On 17 December, despite having discretion to choose his route, Peiper kept to minor roads, slowing his advance to a crawl in the wintry conditions, and on the way perpetrating the notorious massacre of US prisoners near Malmedy. Again he rested overnight, before attacking Stavelot (a small town in eastern Belgium) on 18 December, by which time the now-alert US defenders stopped him in his tracks after blowing a series of bridges.

600 tanks in 13 infantry and five panzer divisions, suddenly attacked the weakest portion of the Allied line, held by the US VIII Corps of General Troy Middleton.

Several days' march from their start lines, the 116th Panzer Division emerged from the morning mists at Hotton to surprise a few men of the US 23rd and 51st Combat Engineers, who were armed with an anti-tank gun, a couple of anti-aircraft guns and a few tanks of the 3rd Armored Division. However, the Greyhounds' morning assault, and another launched in the gloom of evening, narrowly failed to take the crossing from a handful of defending US engineers, clerks and mechanics, "armed with a smattering of bazookas and .50-inch calibre machine-guns", crouching behind hasty barricades of overturned trucks.

Ordinarily the defenders wouldn't have stood a chance, but they had been through the Normandy campaign and were both determined and battle-hardened. They knew the value of their little bridge to the column of impatient panzers, and were determined to hold out until reinforcements arrived. The Germans, meanwhile, were low on fuel. Although they had captured food and some gasoline along the way, they soon ran out again, hampering their ability to manoeuvre

around the little town. The defenders noted many Germans wearing GI olive drab. "We could not tell the difference until we got close enough to see... Most of the Germans we killed and captured there were in American uniforms," recounted LeRoy Hanneman of the US 3rd Armored Division.

Private Lee J Ishmael volunteered to man the anti-tank gun, firing 16 rounds in three minutes at a German tank almost on Hotton's bridge. One of his shots wedged between the turret and the hull, preventing the panzer's turret from traversing, and eventually it was destroyed. Casualties on both sides were heavy, but when the Greyhounds withdrew after two days, looking for another crossing, they left behind a graveyard of Panther tanks. Their dream of a breakthrough to the river Meuse was becoming a nightmare.

Hotton's inhabitants had no warning of the Germans' arrival, and only just managed to tear down Allied flags and posters of Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin before their old adversaries saw them. Girls who had doted on GIs fled in panic when they recognised the field grey and guttural accents. Bursting into houses, hungry Wehrmacht troopers demanded information on the erstwhile US defenders as they emptied kitchen cupboards and carried off sides of

bacon. A farmer's wife begged them to leave her family enough to eat over Christmas. "My men haven't eaten in days. They come first," was the unequivocal reply from a stern, helmeted officer.

As Hitler anticipated, when the weather was too poor to fly, the offensive made great progress. But Allied airpower would prove crucial in crushing German logistic support for the offensive.

## The British backstop

Just outside Hotton, along Route N86, and down the appropriately named Rue de la Libération, is a small military graveyard maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. In many ways, it sums up Britain's commitment to continental Europe during the Second World War. Among the 666 headstones, several commemorate men who fell in May 1940, but the vast majority date from January 1945, when British units tangled with their opponents in the last stages of the battle of the Bulge. Most signify UK nationals, but others honour 88 Canadians, 41 Australians, 10 New Zealanders, a Belgian pilot serving in the RAF, a Pole, and 20 who are unidentified.

This cemetery reminds the visitor that, on New Year's Day 1945, patrols of the British

**Crucial reserves** A patrol from the 53rd Welsh Infantry Division in the snow near Hotton on 4 January 1945



6th Airborne and 53rd Welsh Divisions arrived in Hotton as reinforcements to help prevent any further breakthroughs. They saw themselves as a "backstop" to the "bulge" (hence the name of the campaign) created in American lines.

Elsewhere, the advance stalled in front of the route centres of St Vith and Bastogne, but German tanks of the 2nd Panzer Division almost reached the river Meuse on Christmas Day. They were driven back by a surge of airpower, plus counterattacks by General George S Patton's US 3rd Army from the south and Major General J Lawton Collins's US VII Corps (under temporary command of Field Marshal Montgomery) from the north. These formations sealed the breach on 14 January, and the following day Hitler ordered his remaining panzers out of the now-shrinking salient, though not all the German gains were recovered until the end of the month. Allied casualties in the Bulge eventually reached nearly 80,000 killed, wounded or captured.

Twice invaded and twice liberated during the Second World War, Hotton – which lay on the edge of the German bulge into US lines – represents the reality of combat in the Ardennes. The population was defenceless and learned to cope as best they could with

every colour of uniform until the battle was over

The fighting at various times took the lives of Belgians and Britons, Germans and Americans, civilians and soldiers, and underlines the fact that the Second World War in Europe was fought by coalitions. By December 1944, the Anglo-US coalition included military units from Canada, France, Belgium, Holland, Norway, Luxembourg, Czechoslovakia, Poland and others, ably led by the US supreme commander, Dwight D Eisenhower. Without this rainbow alliance

of committed nations, western Europe would not have been freed as quickly, if at all.

None of this detracts from the achievement of US forces in the Ardennes campaign, to whom a grateful and admiring Winston Churchill paid tribute. "Care must be taken in telling our proud tale not to claim for the British Army an undue share of what is undoubtedly the greatest American battle of the war, and will, I believe, be regarded as an ever famous American victory."

The battle of the Bulge, which saw more US ground troops fighting than in Normandy or the Pacific, deprived the Third Reich of the ability to launch another major attack in the west or east again. As Churchill told the House of Commons on 18 January 1945: "I have seen it suggested that the terrific battle which has been proceeding since 16 December on the American front is an Anglo-American battle. In fact, the United States' troops have done almost all the fighting and have suffered almost all the losses." ■

**THE POPULATION WAS DEFENCELESS AND LEARNED TO COPE AS BEST THEY COULD WITH EVERY COLOUR OF UNIFORM UNTIL THE BATTLE WAS OVER**

Peter Caddick-Adams lectures at military staff colleges and universities around the world. His books include *Snow and Steel: The Battle of the Bulge, 1944–45* (Arrow, 2014) and *Sand and Steel: A New History of D-Day* (Arrow, 2019)

**The first hurdle**

The island of Leyte was the initial objective in the Americans' plan to retake the Philippines. The fighting began soon after they landed on 20 October and continued until mid-December



# TAKING BACK THE PHILIPPINES



US general Douglas MacArthur made it his personal mission to reclaim the Asian archipelago from which he'd been driven in 1942. The struggle involved pain, sacrifice, heroism and the horrors of war, writes **Gavin Mortimer**

**D**epending on one's allegiance, Japanese general Tomoyuki Yamashita was either the 'Tiger of Malaya' – the dashing military genius who had seized Singapore and Malaya from Britain in the first six weeks of 1942 – or he was 'Old Potato Face', the commander of Japanese forces in the Philippines who resembled a root vegetable and carried a fearsome reputation.

Yamashita had arrived in the Philippines in early October 1944 with orders to command the 14th Area Army against what the Japanese believed to be an imminent US invasion of the islands. They had been preparing for just such an attack since the loss of the Mariana Islands that summer, and throughout the early autumn, Japanese forces on the Philippines had been digging defensive positions in anticipation of the next stage of the American drive towards Japan.

The US invasion of the Marianas – they landed on Guam, Saipan and Tinian – had been brutally instructive for the Japanese, and they planned their defence of the Philippines accordingly. No longer would they suffer heavy losses on the beaches under the thunderous American naval guns; instead they would adopt a 'defence in depth' strategy. The invaders would be allowed to come ashore virtually unmolested from artillery, air attack or small arms fire, and only as the Americans began to probe inland would they encounter the full force of the Japanese defences, situated inland and out of range of the enemy's naval guns.

Yamashita had another surprise for the Americans. Contrary to what they expected, he did not intend to make Manila the centrepiece of his defence of the Philippines. ➤



**Coming ashore** General Douglas MacArthur (centre) wades through the shallows as the American forces continue their assault on Leyte

The city was chock-full of pro-US civilians, and it made more sense to the general to draw the invaders into the mountains of the island, where the ravines and gorges would be perfect terrain for guerrilla warfare.

Dividing his army into three battle groups – named 'Shobu', 'Kembu' and 'Shimbu' – Yamashita took personal command of the largest, Shobu, and positioned it in the north of Luzon, to the east of the Lingayen Gulf, where the Japanese expected the Americans to land.

#### Dugout Doug or Lion of Luzon?

The US general whose job it was to evict Yamashita's forces from the Philippines was Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the Southwest Pacific Area. Like his Japanese counterpart, MacArthur had also been endowed with nicknames that varied in reverence. They originated from his exploits in December 1941, when MacArthur had led the doomed defence of the Philippines against the Japanese invaders. To many of his men, MacArthur had been 'Dugout Doug', a contemptuous name for a general who never toured the front line where his men were slowly starving in appalling conditions.

But to the people back home, MacArthur was hailed as 'the Lion of Luzon', a gutsy general according to the heavily censored newspaper reports – who was awarded the Medal of Honor for his "heroic conduct" in marshalling his troops on the islands. Only the

**MACARTHUR HAD FLED THE PHILIPPINES IN FEBRUARY 1942 AND NOW, NEARLY THREE YEARS LATER, HE WAS HELLBENT ON REVENGE**

#### Deadly enemy

Known variously as the 'Tiger of Malaya' and 'Old Potato Face', General Tomoyuki Yamashita carried a fearsome reputation



bedraggled men at the front understood that the award was Washington's way of trying to deflect attention from the reality of a bitter defeat.

MacArthur had fled the Philippines in March 1942 and now, two and a half years later, he was hellbent on revenge. It was MacArthur who had convinced President Franklin Roosevelt that the US had to prioritise the seizure of the Philippines before that of Formosa (now known as Taiwan). Formosa was the preference of Admiral Ernest King, head of the US Navy, who argued that, as it was closer to Japan than the Philippines, it made more strategic sense as a target.

But MacArthur fought his corner with the fervour of a man who had a point to prove. "Give me an aspirin," pleaded the president after three hours of a MacArthur monologue. "In fact, give me another aspirin to take in the morning. In all my life nobody has ever talked to me the way MacArthur did."

MacArthur had a deep attachment to the Philippines, an archipelagic nation comprising 7,641 islands, divided into three chief geographic divisions – Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao – running from north to south.

The middle of these, Visayas, was MacArthur's first objective and on 20 October 1944 the US invasion fleet landed on the island of Leyte. Opposition was more ferocious than MacArthur had expected and it wasn't until the end of December that the Americans had control of the island. As stubborn as the Japanese resistance had been, it had cost



**Left** Bound After landing on Luzon, XIV Corps drove south to take the airfield at Clark Field

them most of their fleet and their air force in the Philippines, and now all that faced the invaders as they turned north towards Luzon were Yamashita's three battle groups dug in on the mountains, and the 17,000 men of Rear Admiral Sanji Iwabuchi's Manila Naval Defence Force.

A good many of the Japanese air force had been lost on kamikaze missions, their pilots diving onto the ships of the American invasion fleet. One ship, the *USS Alpine*, had survived a kamikaze attack at Leyte and still bore the scars as the troops boarded it bound for Lingayen Gulf on the north-western coast of Luzon. "It still had the marks on the side where it had been hit," recalled Private First Class Delmore Evans.

On this occasion, however, the *Alpine* reached its objective unscathed, and on 9 January 1945 Evans and his buddies clambered down into the small landing vessels that transported the soldiers ashore. "The landing vessel could not get completely to shore because the water was too shallow, so they unloaded us and we had to wade in water for about 50 yards," Evans said.

The men were braced for the deafening roar of incoming artillery shells and the retort of rifle fire as they high-kneed through the surf, but they reached the sand without incident. In a matter of a few days, 175,000 men came ashore, establishing a 20-mile beachhead with I Corps protecting its flanks. The task of XIV Corps was to drive south and take the airfield at Clark Field and then push on to Manila, while I Corps would head north and east, where the terrain was more rugged.

Delmore Evans belonged to the 37th Division, which was part of XIV Corps, which initially advanced south without impediment. His job as a lineman was to lay the telephone connections that kept his unit in contact with other army groups as they

headed towards the capital city. "I never thought I'd be climbing telephone poles at two in the morning, but I did plenty of that on the way to Manila," he told a war correspondent, adding that his own tanks caused almost as many problems as the Japanese. "They were always breaking our lines. If we strung the lines on the ground, the tracks cut them up, and if we tied them to the poles, their radio antennas broke them."

#### The race to Manila

Evans's complaint was an indication of the speed of the 37th Division's drive towards Manila, but racing them to the capital was the 1st Cavalry Division, which had arrived to reinforce the XIV Corps, as well as two regiments of the 11th Airborne Division, which came ashore on 31 January about 45 miles south-west of the Filipino capital.

The 1st Cavalry Division won the race to Manila when tanks of the 44th Tank Battalion smashed through the gates of the University of Santo Tomas, which was being used as an internment camp, on the evening of 3 February. Inside were nearly 4,000 Allied civilian prisoners, one of whom, Tressa Roka, wrote in her diary: "Before the men in the tanks knew what was going on, they were pulled out of them and lifted on the shoulders of our scrawny fellow internees. It was impossible to hold back the worshipping and joyous internees."

The arrival of the Americans ushered in celebration, but also unleashed barbarism, as Rear Admiral Iwabuchi ordered that "all people on the battlefield with the exception of Japanese military personnel, Japanese civilians and special construction units be put to death".

As Japanese troops began slaughtering the 800,000-strong population (see box, right), the Americans engaged in bloody street fighting, a task made more difficult

## MASSACRE IN MANILA

The city's people paid a heavy price as Japanese forces fell to the US

Nearly 100,000 Filipino civilians were killed in the battle for Manila – six times more than the combatants who were killed on both sides. Of Allied cities during the Second World War, only the Polish capital, Warsaw, suffered more grievous losses.

The man most responsible for the slaughter was Rear Admiral Sanji Iwabuchi, the commander of Manila's Naval Defence Force. Embittered by his demotion earlier in the war after his battleship was sunk by US forces off Guadalcanal, Iwabuchi took out his fury on Manila.

When American troops entered Manila on 3 February, Iwabuchi committed what would be the first of many war crimes by ordering the decapitation of 100 suspected guerrillas and the bayoneting of their families.

But it was on 9 February that the Japanese forces embarked on what an American war crimes investigator would subsequently describe as "an orgy of mass murder".

In the days that followed, thousands of innocent civilians were murdered in the most appalling circumstances. Some were killed in their own homes, while others were rounded up and slaughtered en masse – like those herded into the dining hall at St Paul's College. The Japanese told them it was for their own safety, but once they were inside, the building was blown up, resulting in the deaths of 360 people.

The next day, Japanese soldiers burst into the Red Cross HQ and bayoneted more than 50, including a newborn baby. One of the few who survived recalled: "When I came to my senses I thought it was a dream, but everybody was dead."

**A city in ruins** American troops survey the wreckage as they advance into Manila on 23 February 1945





**Fighting in the bush** As they progressed along the Villa Verde Trail, US soldiers were often caught up in skirmishes with the Japanese

by the number of buildings constructed out of reinforced concrete to withstand earthquakes. It took four weeks of bitter struggle to crush the Japanese resistance, as the Americans used explosives and flamethrowers to clear out the stubborn defenders street by street.

Courage was commonplace, much of it unheralded, though occasionally it was recognised. A Medal of Honor would later be granted to Private John N Reese Jr of the 37th Infantry Division for his actions at the Paco railway station on 9 February. Together with Cleto Rodriguez, Reese – a Native American – ran towards the enemy and began firing. In two and a half hours, reads Reese's citation, he and Rodriguez "killed more than 82 Japanese [and] completely disorganised their defence... By his gallant determination in the face of tremendous odds, aggressive fighting spirit, and extreme heroism at the cost of his life, PFC Reese materially aided the advance of our troops in Manila and provided a lasting inspiration to all those with whom he served."

#### **Heroism and atrocities**

When Manila was declared liberated on 3 March, I Corps were further north, slowly working their way into the mountains beyond the town of San Jose, in which was concealed Yamashita's Shobu battle group. Other strategically important objectives were taken – including the islands of Bataan and Corregidor – and a bullish MacArthur

issued orders to seize the remaining islands of the archipelago, assigning five divisions to the reconquest.

It was a misjudgment born out of conceit, depleting the American forces that still had to defeat Yamashita in order to occupy strategically valueless islands. The Japanese were dug in on a triangle of towns called Baguio, Bontoc and Bambang; they were hungry, tired and diseased, but determined to fight to the bitter end. The approach to Bambang was known as the Villa Verde Trail, and down it marched the 32nd Division – nicknamed the 'Red Arrow Division' on account of the insignia worn on their shoulders. Among their number was Staff Sergeant Ysmael Villegas, known as 'Smiley', already a legend among his unit after winning a Silver Star for charging an enemy

machine-gun nest. On 20 March, the day before he turned 21, Villegas was ordered to secure a high point on the trail – but his squad came under fire from enemy troops "strongly entrenched in connected caves and foxholes on commanding ground".

Villegas had grown up as the eldest of 13 children, and was used to looking after his younger siblings. His protective instincts kicked in as he saw the Japanese fire cutting down his men. Ignoring the bullets kicking up dirt at his feet, he ran towards an enemy foxhole and shot dead the occupant. "He rushed a second foxhole while bullets missed him by inches, and killed one more of the enemy," reads his Medal of Honor citation. "In rapid succession he charged a third, a fourth, a fifth foxhole, each time destroying the enemy within. The fire against him increased in intensity, but he pressed onward to attack a sixth position. As he neared his goal, he was hit and killed by enemy fire."

As the British had underestimated the fighting qualities of Yamashita's men at the start of the war, so the Japanese were surprised by the tenacity of the Americans on Luzon. For months, a pitiless guerrilla war was fought in the mountainous jungle in the north of the island. Meanwhile, June saw the onset of the rainy season. "It rained every day and it rained very, very hard," recalled Staff Sgt Nick Angelicola of the 32nd Division. "We were wet continually. We never had dry clothes... it would get so bad because we could never change our shoes and stockings, because we didn't have that much time, and we were always wet. In the jungle, everything is wet."

Malaria and dysentery added to the misery, as did huge leeches that sucked the blood of the soldiers. But Angelicola was present on 2 September 1945 when Yamashita and his remaining men laid down their arms, 18 days after Emperor Hirohito had announced the Japanese surrender.

With Iwabuchi dead, Yamashita was deemed most responsible for what had happened in Manila. One newspaper printed a grim roll call of what had taken place: "62,278 tortured and murdered civilians, 144 slain American officers and enlisted men, and 488 raped women".

Yamashita was found guilty and hanged in a sugarcane field south of Manila on 23 February 1946. He went to his death stripped of all decorations and without his officer's uniform because, in the words of Douglas MacArthur, he had "failed utterly his soldier faith". ■

## **THE AMERICANS USED EXPLOSIVES AND FLAMETHROWERS TO CLEAR OUT THE STUBBORN DEFENDERS STREET BY STREET**

Gavin Mortimer is an author and historian. His books include *The Men Who Made the SAS* (Constable, 2015)

During the opening months of 1945, the Allies were engaged in a desperate dash to seize German territory. Yet, says **Antony Beevor**, as US and Soviet forces advanced on the capital, Britain found itself increasingly sidelined

# THE RACE FOR BERLIN

A soldier of the 2nd British Army, pictured during the operation to capture Bremen, 26 April 1945. Though the British successfully subdued the city, by now they were playing a bit-part role in the conquest of Germany.



**O**n the afternoon of 11 January 1945, Generaloberst Heinz Guderian received the news he had been dreading. His intelligence chief confirmed that the great Soviet winter offensive was to begin the next morning. Only two days before, Guderian had warned Adolf Hitler: "The eastern front is like a house of cards. If the front is broken through at one point all the rest will collapse." Guderian, the head of the Oberkommando des Heeres (army high command), was responsible for the eastern front. He had feared from the start that Hitler's Ardennes Offensive the previous month (a major attack against the western Allies through the Ardennes region of southern Belgium) would leave his forces in the east at the mercy of the Red Army.

Josef Stalin did not trust his western Allies, especially the anti-Bolshevik Winston Churchill. He made a habit of rubbing in the fact that the British and US armies had suffered few casualties in the

## STALIN WANTED BERLIN, "THE LAIR OF THE FASCIST BEAST", FOR REASONS OF PRESTIGE – AND TO CAPTURE GERMAN URANIUM

war compared with the enormous sacrifices of the Red Army. He even pretended that he had advanced the date of his winter offensive in order to save the Americans in the Ardennes. This was untrue. The German attack in Belgium had been halted on 26 December, while Stalin's real reason for bringing forward the date was due to meteorological forecasts. A thaw was predicted for later in January, and the

Red Army needed the ground to remain frozen for its tank armies to charge forward to the river Oder.

The winter offensive began on 12 January, with Marshal Ivan Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front advancing from the Soviet bridgeheads west of the Vistula towards Upper Silesia. Over the next two days, the 2nd and 3rd Belorussian Fronts assaulted East Prussia, and Marshal Georgi Zhukov's 1st Belorussian Front began its operation towards Berlin from south of Warsaw. Once crossings had been secured over the river Pilica, there was little to stop the 1st and 2nd Guards Tank Armies. Their headlong advance by day and night meant that all orders from the führer's headquarters were 24 hours out of date by the time they reached German divisions.

The front collapsed even more rapidly than Guderian had feared. Some 8 million German civilians were fleeing for their lives. Hitler made things worse by his meddling, and on 31 January the first Red Army soldiers crossed the frozen

Soviet armour crosses the river Oder during Stalin's offensive on 16 April 1945. The Soviet leader was determined to seize Berlin before the western Allies got there.





At Yalta in February 1945, Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin discuss Europe's postwar division, as well as their strategy for the invasion of Germany



Hitler and his general staff (including Helmut Oberlander, right, and Hermann Göring, left) plan an air strike in support of the Ardennes Offensive. 1944

Oder to form a bridgehead less than 60 miles from Berlin.

Another reason for Stalin's haste was to secure all Polish territory before the Yalta Conference began on 4 February 1945. He intended to impose on Poland his puppet 'Lublin government' and treat the Armia Krajowa, or Home Army, which was loyal to the Polish government-in-exile, as 'fascists', despite their heroic and doomed uprising against the Germans in Warsaw the previous year. He greatly exaggerated the incidence of German stay-behind forces in order to justify the oppression of non-communist Poles. Any found with weapons, whether or not they helped the Red Army in its operations, were arrested by NKVD (secret police) rifle regiments. Stalin claimed that he had to secure his rear areas to ensure the resupply of his fighting formations.

#### Political machinations

The Yalta Conference, between the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union, had been organised in order to discuss Europe's postwar reorganisation. During the conference, Stalin took every opportunity to divide the British and the Americans. He knew that Churchill wanted to secure freedom for Poland while Franklin

## DURING THE YALTA CONFERENCE, STALIN TOOK EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO DIVIDE THE BRITISH AND THE AMERICANS

D Roosevelt's priorities were to establish the United Nations and persuade Stalin to attack Japanese forces in Manchuria and northern China.

The US president felt that he could win Stalin's trust and even admitted to the Soviet leader that the western Allies did not agree on the strategy for the invasion of Nazi Germany. Roosevelt suggested that General Dwight Eisenhower should establish direct contact with the Stavka supreme command of the Red Army to discuss plans. Stalin encouraged the idea so that he would know what the Americans were doing, while giving nothing away himself.

Stalin made clear his contempt for the rights of smaller nations. In central Europe and the Balkans, Soviet interests were paramount. "The Polish question is a question of life and death for the Soviet state," he said. "Poland represents the gravest of strategic problems for the Soviet Union. Throughout history, Poland has served as a corridor for enemies coming to attack Russia." One could well argue that the origins of the Cold War lay in 1941 and the traumatic shock of the German invasion. Stalin was determined to have a security belt of satellite countries to prevent such a thing ever happening again.



Using again the argument that Poland was in the rear of his armies attacking Germany, he compared the situation to France, where he was restraining the communists from causing trouble in the rear of the western Allies. Churchill soon realised that he was out on a limb. Roosevelt, suffering from extreme ill-health, showed little interest. To Churchill's horror, Roosevelt even announced without warning him that US forces would be withdrawn from Europe. The Americans simply wanted to finish the war. They showed little interest in the postwar map of Europe. All Churchill could ask for was free elections in Poland, but Stalin's insistence on a government "friendly to the Soviet Union" suggested it would be under Moscow's control.

Ever since the breakout from Normandy, led by General George S Patton's US 3rd Army in August 1944, British influence had been fading rapidly. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's repeated attempts to be appointed ground forces commander had only made things worse. They had culminated in his boasting that he had saved the situation in the Ardennes. General George C Marshall, the US chief of staff, was furious, and Eisenhower told Churchill that none of his generals were willing to serve under

Montgomery again. "His relations with Monty are quite insoluble," Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke wrote after a meeting with Eisenhower on 6 March. "He only sees the worst side of Monty."

Montgomery had even been beaten in the race to cross the Rhine, with the Americans taking the bridge at Remagen on 7 March and Patton securing a bridgehead south of Mainz. Once the 21st Army Group was across the Rhine on 24 March, Montgomery lost the US 9th Army from his command, and the British were sidelined in the north. His hopes of leading the advance on Berlin from the west were dashed. He was ordered to head for Denmark via Hamburg. Churchill's desire to reach Berlin and "shake hands with the Russians as far to the east as possible" was ignored. Eisenhower, who had started to believe in an Alpine Redoubt to which the remaining German forces would withdraw, intended to send the bulk of his forces across central and southern Germany.

#### US defers to the Soviets

Stalin, who had criticised the western Allies for advancing so slowly, reacted very differently to news of the bridge at Remagen. He immediately summoned Marshal Zhukov to Moscow, even though he was

conducting the campaign to secure the 'Baltic balcony' of Pomerania before attacking Berlin. With American bridgeheads across the Rhine, Stalin now feared they might get to Berlin first. He ordered Zhukov to work through the night preparing plans for the 'Berlin operation'.

Zhukov later acknowledged their concern that "the British command was still nursing the dream of capturing Berlin before the Red Army". Stalin wanted Berlin, "the lair of the fascist beast", both for reasons of prestige and because he hoped to capture German uranium stocks and the scientists working on an atomic bomb. He knew from his spies on the US's nuclear Manhattan Project that the Americans were close to perfecting their own. What he did not know was that the bulk of the uranium had already been evacuated south to the Black Forest.

Eisenhower, on the other hand, considered Berlin was "no longer a particularly important objective". On 2 March, he started to request the opinion of the Soviet Stavka on strategic planning. This exasperated the British, especially Churchill. Some of his officers were appalled by US deference to Stalin's wishes, bitterly referencing a call employed by London prostitutes when soliciting American soldiers: "Have a go,



Montgomery, Eisenhower and the latter's British deputy, Tedder Stalin exploited the tension between the US and British commanders of the Allies



Joe." To British outrage, Eisenhower communicated his plans to Stalin even before he told Churchill or his own British deputy, Air Chief Marshal Arthur Tedder. This signal, known as SCAF-252, became a tense issue between the Allies.

British suspicions of Stalin's intentions grew quickly when news arrived of mass arrests in Poland, as soldiers rounded up all those who did not welcome Soviet rule. Western representatives, meanwhile, were denied access to Poland, despite the agreement at Yalta. At the same time, Stalin's paranoia increased when he heard of US negotiations with German officers in northern Italy. He became convinced that the Germans would surrender to the British and Americans, or let them through while they strengthened their forces facing the Red Army. He even feared a secret deal.

After receiving SCAF-252 on the evening of 31 March, Stalin approved Eisenhower's plan to attack well to the south of Berlin and encouraged his fears of a German last-ditch resistance in the Alps. The next morning, Stalin summoned Marshals Zhukov and Konev. "Well, then," he said, eyeing the two men. "Who is going to take Berlin: are we or are the Allies?" His order was to surround the city first before attacking

inwards to prevent any chance of the Americans coming in from the west. The offensive with 2.5 million men was to take place "no later than 16 April".

Later that day, which happened to be 1 April, Stalin sent his reply to Eisenhower. He assured his trusting ally that "Berlin has lost its former strategic importance" and that the Soviet command would send only "second-rate forces against it". The bulk of the Red Army would join up with Eisenhower's armies further to the south. They would not start their advance until the second half of May. "However, this plan may undergo certain alterations, depending on circumstances." It was the greatest April Fool in modern history.

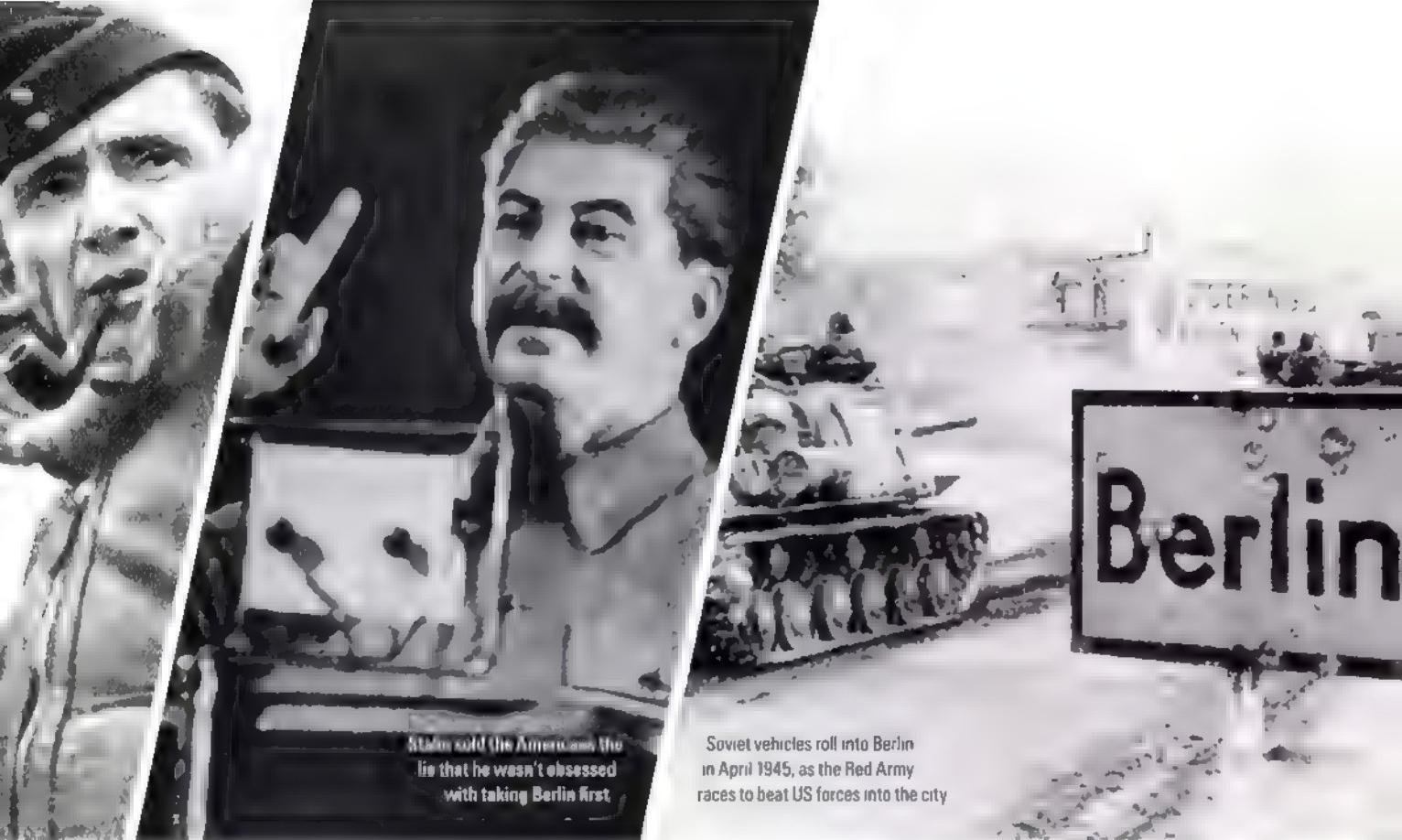
During the first week of April, the British 2nd Army reached Celle, 25 miles north-east of Hanover, while the US 9th Army, led by General WH Simpson, was beyond Hanover and heading for the river Elbe. The 1st US Army was heading for Leipzig (125 miles south-west of Berlin) and Patton's 3rd Army was in the Harz mountains on its way to the Czech border. By 12 April, the British were approaching Bremen and the American 9th Army had bridgeheads across the Elbe.

Simpson wanted his divisions to head straight for Berlin, but on 15 April

Eisenhower stopped him there to avoid casualties. In fact Simpson's forces would have faced little resistance, since the best German formations faced east, awaiting the onslaught from the rivers Oder and Neisse, which began the next day. But Eisenhower had made the right decision for the wrong reasons. Stalin was so determined to have Berlin that almost certainly he would have turned his long-range artillery and attack aircraft on US forces, claiming that the Americans were responsible for the mistake. And Eisenhower was determined to avoid clashes at all costs. Churchill wanted Patton to take Prague to pre-empt a Soviet occupation, but Eisenhower refused on General Marshall's advice.

#### The capital falls

While eight Soviet armies fought their way into Berlin, the British in north-west Germany, far from the centre of events, pushed on to Bremen. They occupied it on 27 April after a five-day battle. Montgomery, to Eisenhower's frustration, crossed the lower Elbe in his usual methodical way to take Hamburg. But then news arrived that the Red Army was making a dash for Denmark ahead of him. The 11th Armoured Division rushed on to Lubeck on the Baltic



coast and British paratroopers seized the key city of Wismar just two hours before Marshal Konstantin Rokossovsky's forces reached the town. Denmark was saved, but Poland, to Churchill's bitter regret, was not.

Stalin's intention to impose a Soviet government in Poland had become clear at the end of March, when 16 Polish representatives of the government-in-exile in London were arrested despite safe-conduct passes. In May, Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov informed Edward Stettinius, the US secretary of state, that they had been charged with the murder of 200 members of the Red Army - a preposterous accusation.

Further indications of communist repression in Poland convinced Churchill that something had to be done. Within a week of Germany's surrender, he summoned his chiefs of staff to ask them to study the possibility of forcing back Soviet troops to secure "a square deal for Poland". The offensive should take place by 1 July 1945, before Allied troops were demobilised or transferred to the Far East.

Although the discussions were conducted in great secrecy, one of the Whitehall moles reporting to Beria, the Soviet police chief, heard of them. He sent details to Moscow of the instruction to Montgomery to gather

## CHURCHILL ASKED HIS CHIEFS OF STAFF TO STUDY THE POSSIBILITY OF FORCING BACK SOVIET TROOPS TO SECURE "A SQUARE DEAL FOR POLAND"

up captured German arms in case they were needed to re-arm Wehrmacht troops. The Soviets, not surprisingly, felt that their worst suspicions had been confirmed.

Operation Unthinkable, as even Churchill called it, was a mad enterprise. British soldiers, grateful for the Red Army's sacrifice, would almost certainly have refused to obey orders. And the Americans would surely have rejected the plan. The chiefs of staff all agreed that it was "unthinkable". "The idea is of course fantastic and the chances of success quite impossible," wrote Field Marshal Brooke. "There is no doubt that from now onwards Russia is all-powerful in Europe."

Churchill, the greatest war leader Britain has ever produced, was forced to face the fact that his impoverished country had lost almost all its power and influence in a dramatically changed world. Britain had helped liberate the western half of Europe, at the cost of abandoning the eastern half to a Soviet dictatorship that would last for another 44 years. □

**Antony Beevor** is an author and historian. His books include *Arnhem: The Battle of the Bridges, 1944* (Viking, 2018) and *Berlin: The Downfall, 1945* (Viking, 2002)

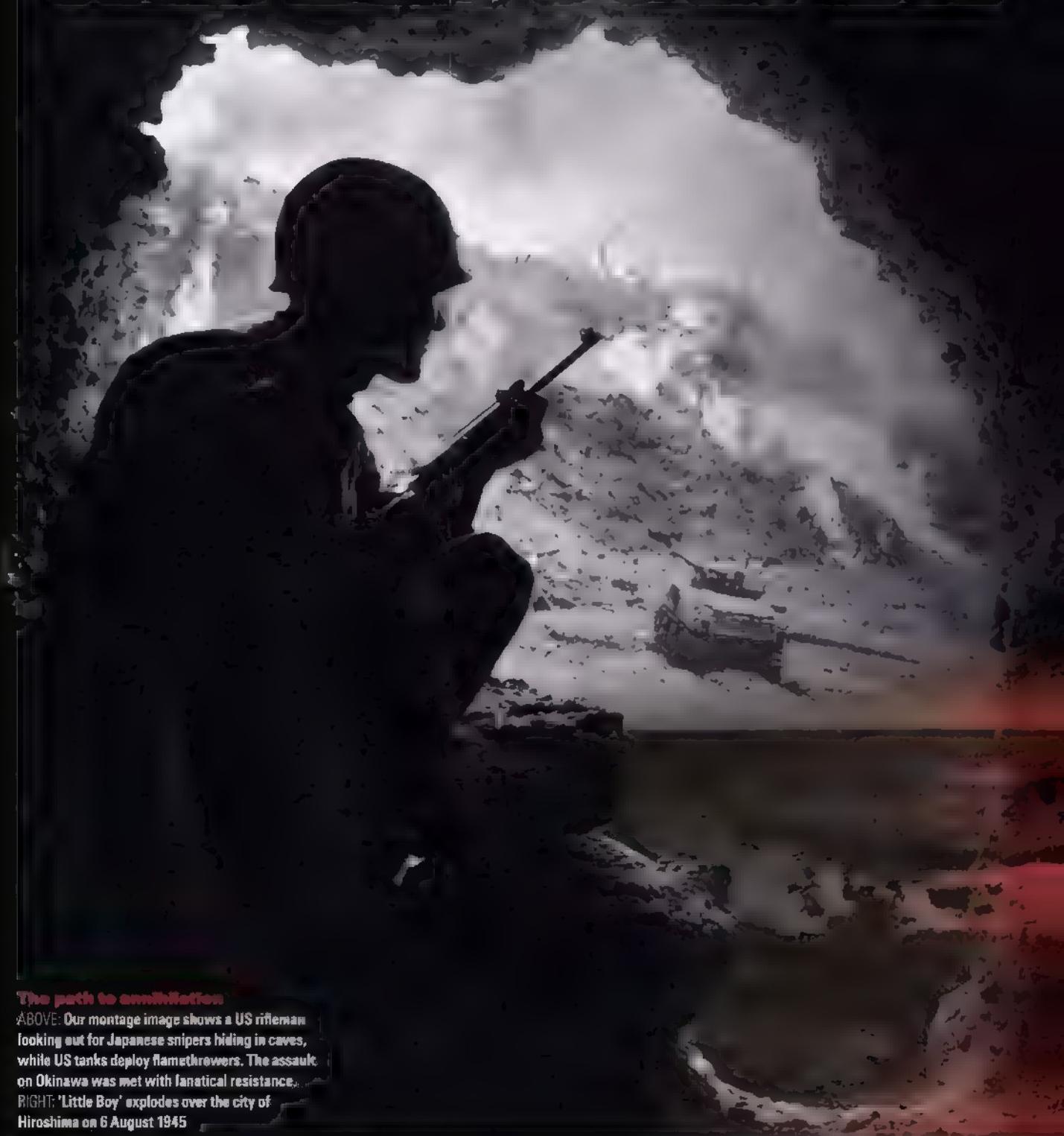


## Hell freezes over

US soldiers of the 82nd Airborne Division capture an SS soldier during a patrol near Malmedy in Belgium. In the winter of 1944–45, Hitler launched a desperate counteroffensive known as the battle of the Bulge. At this stage the SS was no longer an elite fighting force, but contained young and old conscripts, and troops drafted in from the Wehrmacht. Commanders ordered a number of infamous massacres during their bid to break through Allied lines.



# THE BLOODBATH



## The path to annihilation

ABOVE: Our montage image shows a US rifleman looking out for Japanese snipers hiding in caves, while US tanks deploy flamethrowers. The assault on Okinawa was met with fanatical resistance. RIGHT: 'Little Boy' explodes over the city of Hiroshima on 6 August 1945.

# AND THE BOMB

The US assault on Okinawa 75 years ago was the bloodiest of the Pacific War, an 83-day slog that cost 250,000 lives. **Saul David** describes a battle so terrible that it persuaded President Truman to reject an invasion of Japan and turn instead to the atomic bomb



**S**moke and dust rose up from the shore, thousands of feet high," wrote the Pulitzer prize-winning war correspondent Ernie Pyle, watching from the 5th Marines' command ship, "until finally the land was completely veiled. Bombs and strafing machine guns and roaring engines mingled with the crash of naval bombardment and seemed to drown out all existence. The ghastly concussion set up vibrations in the air – a sort of flutter – which pained and pounded the ears as though with invisible drumsticks. During all this time the waves of assault craft were forming up behind us."

It was 7:45am on 1 April 1945 – or 'Love Day', the invasion of the 70-mile-long island of Okinawa, the most southerly of Japan's 47 prefectures. Pyle's ship was just one of 1,300 Allied vessels, containing 183,000 combat troops, that were taking part in the greatest air-land-sea battle in history, the last major clash of the Second World War, and one that would have profound consequences for the modern world.

The decision to attack Okinawa – Operation 'Iceberg' – had been taken by US military chiefs the previous October. Possession of Okinawa, just 400 miles south of the Japanese home islands, would allow Allied planes to bomb strategic targets on the mainland and prepare the ground for an amphibious invasion. It was the culmination of a two-pronged American advance – through New Guinea and the Philippines and, further north, through the islands of the central Pacific – that had been gathering pace since the landings on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands in August 1942. Now, with this second landing on Japanese soil (following Iwo Jima in February 1945), the end of the Pacific War was in sight.

#### Dead in the water

In one of the first assault craft to hit the beach at H-hour – 8:30am – was 22-year-old Corporal Jim Johnston from Nebraska. As they approached the shore, Johnston thought of the dead marines he had seen in the water and on the beach during the bloody battle for the island of Peleliu the previous September, and "wondered what we would look like to the waves that would come behind us". He approached a pillbox, anticipating the "impact of bullets ripping into my body", but there was no fire. The pillbox was empty. So he and his men moved inland and, within an hour, the beachhead "was several hundred yards deep and growing by the minute".

By nightfall, the beachhead on the west coast of Okinawa was 15,000 yards long, and in places 5,000 yards deep. More than



## OKINAWA WAS THE GREATEST AIR-LAND-SEA BATTLE IN HISTORY, THE LAST MAJOR CLASH OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

60,000 men were ashore. In addition, numerous tanks and anti-aircraft units had been landed, as had all the divisional artillery and, by evening, guns were in position to support the forward troops. A captured airfield was now serviceable for emergency landings.

The American commander, Lieutenant General Simon B Buckner Jr, was elated. "We landed practically without opposition," he noted in his diary, "and gained more ground than we expected to for three days... The

Japs have missed their best opportunity."

Unbeknown to Buckner, who was fighting his first ever battle, the day was going entirely to plan for the Japanese commanders. Aware that their 80,000 soldiers, bolstered by around 20,000 Okinawan 'Boeitai' (home guard), were outgunned and outnumbered, they had chosen to concentrate the bulk of their forces behind several heavily fortified lines in the southern third of the island where, well protected in tunnels and caves, they could withstand any amount of American bombs and shells. Here several jagged lines of ridges and rocky escarpment had been turned into formidable nests of interlocking pillboxes and firing positions. All were connected by a network of caves and passageways inside the hills that allowed the defenders to move safely to each point of attack.

#### Stiffening opposition

Blissfully unaware of the Japanese strategy, Buckner's men made rapid progress during the first few days of the campaign, cutting the island in two and brushing aside light enemy forces. By 4 April, Buckner's US 10th Army held a slice of Okinawa 15 miles long

### **Smoking out the enemy**

US marines watch a barrage of phosphorous shells explode among Japanese positions, May 1945. The defenders were holed up in a network of interconnected caves, almost impervious to bombs and shells.



and from three to ten miles wide. The beachhead included two airfields and beaches that, in the words of the official history of the Okinawa campaign, "could take immense tonnage from the cargo ships, and sufficient space for dumps and installations that were rapidly being built".

But, as the US Army's XXIV Corps moved south towards the main Japanese defences, the opposition stiffened. The first line was the Kakazu hill mass, which boasted formidable defensive features including a deep moat, a hill studded with natural and man-made positions and a cluster of thick-walled buildings. A four-day assault began on 9 April, but failed to break through the storm of Japanese artillery, mortar and machine gunfire – costing the XXIV Corps almost 3,000 casualties. One veteran described the operation as a "meat-grinder" for the US troops.

When a second offensive in late April made little headway, subordinates urged Buckner to try an amphibious landing *behind* the Japanese defences. He refused on the grounds that the beaches in the south were too small for resupply, and

## **"HELL'S OWN CESSPOOL"**

The brutal struggle for Okinawa in figures

Battle dates:

1 April–22 June 1945

| ALLIED  | JAPANESE   |
|---|--|
| Troop numbers   | 540,000, including navy, air and army (of whom 183,000 American ground troops took part in the initial assault)  |
| Casualties  | 12,520 dead, 37,000 wounded and 26,000 'non-battle' casualties   |
| Other losses  | 458 planes and 36 ships (with a further 368 damaged)   |
| <b>KEY COMMANDERS</b>   |  |
| Navy  | Admiral Raymond A Spruance (left), commanding the US 5th Fleet   |
| Air force   | Vice Admiral Seiichi Ito, commanding the 'Ten-go' task force. He went down with the battleship Yamato on 7 April 1945                                  |
| Ground forces   | Vice Admiral Matome Ugaki, commanding the 5th Air Fleet – killed conducting a kamikaze attack on 15 August   |
| Lieutenant General Simon B Buckner Jr, commanding the US 10th Army (killed by enemy shellfire on 18 June) | Lieutenant General Mitsuru Ushijima (left), commanding the Japanese 32nd Army. He killed himself with his chief of staff in the early hours of 22 June |



**Shot down**

A kamikaze plane goes down in flames while attempting to attack USS *Wake Island*, 3 April 1945. The Japanese also launched ships on suicide missions, human torpedoes and manned rockets at the American fleet.

**Sheer courage**

This image, taken after the battle, shows Desmond Doss (top) at the spot where he had coordinated the rescue of 50 wounded comrades by lowering them down the Maeda Escarpment.



there was a danger that the troops would fail to break out of their beachhead

It was a missed opportunity, and one that would have costly consequences. Buckner admitted as much to his wife when he wrote: "The Japs here seem to have the strongest position yet encountered in the Pacific, and it will be a slow tedious grind with flame-throwers, explosives placed by hand and the closest of teamwork to dislodge them without very heavy losses."

**Stumps of rotting teeth**

In early May, Buckner ordered the marines of III Amphibious Corps, which had captured the Motobu peninsula in the north, to reinforce the 'doughboys' of XXIV Corps in the south. The first view of the battlefield was a shock to Sergeant William Manchester of the 2/29th Marines. "It was," he recalled, "a monstrous sight, a moonscape. Hills, ridges and cliffs rose and fell along the front like the grey stumps of rotting teeth. There was nothing green left: artillery had denuded and scarred every inch of ground. Tiny flares glowed and disappeared. Shrapnel burst with bluish white puffs. Jets of flamethrowers flickered, and here and there new explosions stirred up the rubble."

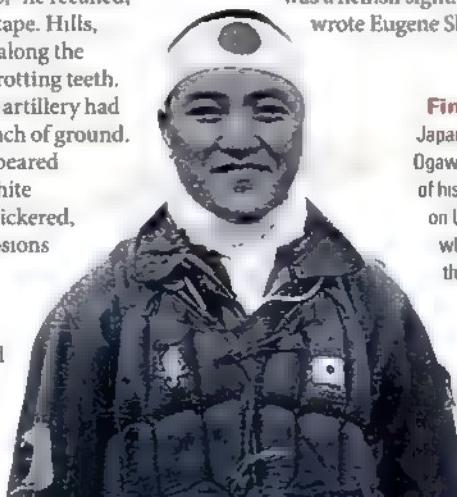
During this phase of the fighting, Private First Class Desmond Doss, a 26-year-old Seventh Day Adventist from

Virginia – who had joined up as a medic to avoid the need to kill – won the Medal of Honor after rescuing at least 50 wounded comrades and then lowering them to safety down a sheer cliff known as the Maeda Escarpment. Doss's astonishing feat was celebrated in the 2016 Mel Gibson-directed film *Hacksaw Ridge*.

Some of the most savage fighting was for a seemingly insignificant feature – described by one veteran as an "ugly hive" of "coral and volcanic rock, 300 yards long and 100 feet high" – dubbed Sugar Loaf Hill. The week-long battle to capture the hill cost the 6th Marine Division more than 2,600 casualties, including three battalion commanders and nine company commanders, and a further 1,200 cases of 'combat fatigue'. With heavy rain adding to the misery, the battlefield was a hellish sight. "The scene," wrote Eugene Sledge of

**Final mission**

Japanese pilot Kiyoshi Ogawa, pictured ahead of his kamikaze attack on USS *Bunker Hill*, which cost more than 300 US lives



3/5th Marines, "was nothing but mud; shellfire, flooded craters with their silent, pathetic, rotting occupants; knocked-out tanks and amtracs, and discarded equipment – utter desolation... Men struggled and fought and bled in an environment so degrading I believed we had been flung into hell's own cesspool."

Determined to defend Okinawa to the last, the Japanese fought with fanatical bravery. The garrison was supported by waves of kamikaze attacks from planes, manned rockets, human torpedoes and even ships launched on suicide missions from the home islands. The planes were flown by officers of the *Shimpū Tokkōtai*, the Divine Wind Special Attack units, who had pledged to "crash their airplanes into enemy ships in acts of self immolation". Meanwhile, the one-way surface ship mission, known as Operation 'Ten-go' was an attempt by the superbattleship *Yamato*, the world's largest, to wreak havoc among the Allied ships with its 18-inch guns before beaching itself on the shore and using its crew as naval infantry.

These attacks were launched with the aim of destroying or driving off the ships of the US 5th Fleet (including a powerful Royal Navy component) and isolating the American troops on Okinawa. But they failed – and thousands of Japanese lost their lives, including 2,500 on *Yamato* alone. However, they did sink 36 US ships and damage a further 368, the heaviest US



**Fight to the death**  
Marines look on as dynamite charges explode among Japanese caves. The vast majority of Okinawa's 110,000 defenders died in the battle for the island.



**Last sighting** Lieutenant General Simon B Buckner Jr (right), commander of the US 10th Army, pictured moments before he was killed by a Japanese shell while observing an American attack, 18 June.

naval losses of the Second World War.

Left to fight on alone, the Japanese garrison made a desperate last stand in the southern tip of the island where it had herded many civilians. The end came on 22 June 1945, when the 10th Army HQ announced that all organised resistance on Okinawa had ceased, though it would take another week to complete the mopping-up operation.

#### Caught in the crossfire

During the 83 days of the battle, around a quarter of a million people were killed. They included the vast majority of the 110,000 Japanese and Okinawan combatants, most of whom refused to surrender. Some 12,500 US servicemen lost their lives (out of total casualties of 76,000), making Okinawa by far the bloodiest US battle of the Pacific – and one of the costliest in the country's history. Perhaps most tragically of all, more than 125,000 Okinawan civilians were killed (a third of the prewar population) – either caught in the cross-fire or because they believed Japanese propaganda that it was better to kill themselves than be raped and murdered by the Americans. One 15 year old Okinawan boy was persuaded by Japanese soldiers to kill his own mother. He recalled. "We tried to use rope at first, but in the end we hit her over the head with stones. I was crying as I did it and she was crying too."

Among the notable fatalities were both field commanders. Lieutenant General Buckner was killed by a Japanese artillery shell as he observed an American attack, becoming the most senior US officer to die in the war. A Japanese vice admiral also lost his life, as did the celebrated war correspondent Ernie Pyle, who had survived north Africa, Italy and the D-Day landings only to fall to a sniper's bullet on a small island off the north coast of Okinawa.

But even more than the appalling ferocity of the fighting, it is the far-reaching consequences of Okinawa that make it one of the most significant battles in world history. On 18 June, with the Japanese resistance on Okinawa all but broken, US president Harry S Truman, in office for barely two months,

met his military chiefs to discuss Japan's unconditional surrender. The only way to achieve this, said the US Army chief of staff, George C Marshall, was to invade Japan's home islands with a force of 750,000 men, an operation scheduled for 1 November. That would be followed up by an even bigger second invasion in the spring. Casualties were impossible to estimate, said Marshall, but given the huge number of men lost on Okinawa, and the fact that the enemy would fight even more fanatically in defence of Japan proper, it would be a "terrifying, bloody ordeal" for the servicemen involved.

Was there any alternative to a ground invasion? asked Truman. Yes, said assistant secretary of war John J McCloy. To threaten to use the newly developed atom bomb, and if the threat was ignored, to drop it on a Japanese city "I think," he added, "our moral position would be better if we gave them a specific warning of the bomb."

When challenged by others that the bomb might not go off, thus tarnishing America's prestige, McCloy responded: "All the scientists have told us that the thing will go off. It's just a matter of testing it out now, but they're quite certain from reports I've seen that this bomb is a success."

Truman was encouraged by this, but said no decision could be taken until they knew the bomb would work. Planning would continue for the invasion on 1 November. But everything changed on 16 July when

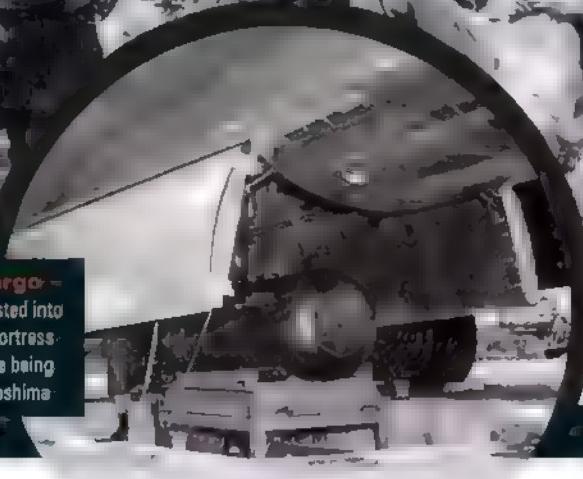
**ONE OKINAWAN BOY WAS PERSUADED BY JAPANESE SOLDIERS TO KILL HIS OWN MOTHER. "I WAS CRYING AS I DID IT AND SHE WAS CRYING TOO," HE RECALLED**

**Pain of battle**

A US Marine guides a wounded Japanese soldier from a blasted cave, 17 June



**Deadly cargo** –  
‘Little Boy’ is hoisted into  
the B-29 Superfortress  
*Enola Gay* before being  
dropped on Hiroshima



Truman received word in Berlin, where he was attending the inter-Allied Potsdam conference with Stalin and other leaders, that the “first full-scale test” of “the atomic fission bomb” in the New Mexico desert had been “successful beyond the most optimistic expectations”. The memo added: “We now had the means to insure [the war’s] speedy conclusion and save thousands of American lives.”

On hearing of the successful test in New Mexico, Winston Churchill felt that the “nightmare picture” of an invasion of Japan – which might have cost a million American and 500,000 British lives – “had vanished” and “in its place was the vision, fair and bright it seemed, of the end of the whole war in one or two violent shocks”. This “almost supernatural weapon” would give the Japanese “an excuse which would save their honour and release them from the obligation of being killed to the last fighting man”.

Soon after, Truman signed the final ultimatum to Japan, ‘the Potsdam Declaration’. It called upon Japan to agree to immediate unconditional surrender or face “prompt and utter destruction”. When Tokyo ignored the ultimatum, Truman gave

**War weary**

Marines rest after a hard night's fighting, 29 May. More than 12,000 of their compatriots died on Okinawa, making the battle the bloodiest US campaign in the Pacific War

the order to drop an atom bomb on Hiroshima, “an army city” and “major quartermaster depot” with warehouses full of military supplies.

**A million dead**

Truman’s decision to authorise the use of the atom bomb was directly influenced by the bloodbath on Okinawa. He feared that an invasion of Japan would look like “Okinawa from one end of Japan to the other”, and that it would cost the US military more than a million dead and wounded. It would also kill countless Japanese soldiers and civilians. “My object,” he wrote, “is to save as many

American lives as possible but I also have a human feeling for the women and children of Japan.”

On 6 August, the US B-29 Superfortress *Enola Gay* dropped the first atom bomb – ‘Little Boy’ – on Hiroshima. A second bomb – ‘Fat Man’ – exploded in Nagasaki three days later. The combined dead from the bombs were 200,000 Japanese, mostly civilians – an appalling total, but less than the number killed on Okinawa, and a fraction of those who would have died if the US had invaded mainland Japan.

Such a desperate course of action was no longer necessary. Japan agreed to surrender unconditionally on 14 August, much to the delight and relief of most Americans. “When the bombs dropped,” wrote one 21-year-old US officer, “and the news began to circulate that we would not be obliged to run up the beaches near Tokyo assault-firing while being mortared and shelled, for all the fake manliness of our facades we cried with relief and joy. We were going to live. We were going to grow up to adulthood after all.” ■

Saul David is a historian and broadcaster. His new book, *Crucible of Hell: Okinawa, The Last Great Battle of the Second World War*, will be published by William Collins on 2 April

**TRUMAN'S DECISION TO AUTHORISE THE USE OF THE ATOM BOMB WAS DIRECTLY INFLUENCED BY THE BLOODBATH ON OKINAWA**

# "I mow and gibber like an ape"

One US marine says his "heart is breaking" after the battle of Okinawa. In the heat of combat he adopted many different identities: Major and Mr Justice, the collector of "battle trophies", became inexplicable to anyone who asked him what he was doing



**S**hawn O'Leary fought during the Second World War. In 1941, he wrote a poem about the traumas of battle. The verse reads:

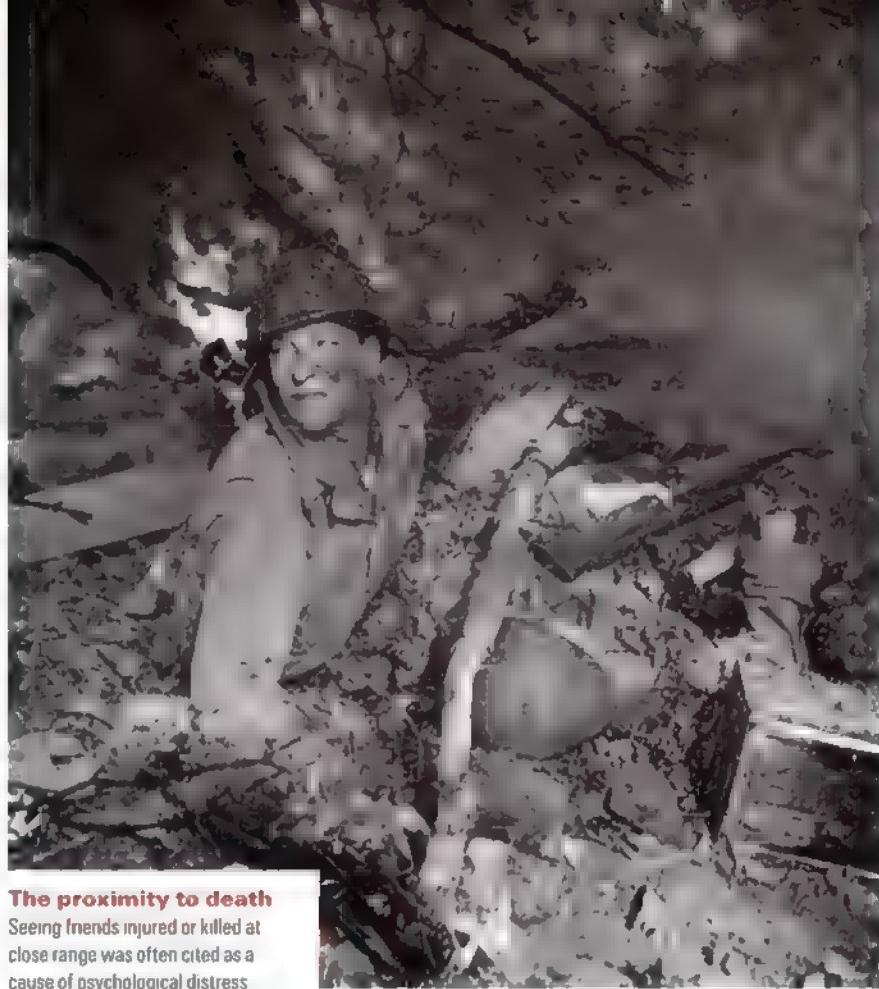
*And I -  
I mow and gibber like an ape.  
But what can I say, what do? -  
There is no saying and no doing.*

The message is clear: war hurts. It snuffs out humanity, destroys language, renders the world meaningless. Perpetrating, experiencing and witnessing massacres and other atrocities causes men, women and children to suffer psychological trauma. Years, even decades after the carnage stops, memories of violence still torment survivors.

During the Second World War, the names given to psychological breakdown varied from 'combat fatigue' to 'battle exhaustion', 'traumatic psycho-neurosis' and 'stress syndrome'. Many continued to use the First World War term 'shell shock', despite the fact that military and medical officers had long rejected it. Instead of psychological trauma being a 'shock', these officers insisted that being terrified was clinically normal in combat situations. In the words of Herbert Spiegel, author of *Psychiatric Observations in the Tunisian Campaign* (1944): "A state of tension and anxiety is so prevalent in the front lines that it must be regarded as a normal reaction in this grossly abnormal situation. Where ordinary physiological signs of fear end, and where signs and symptoms of a clinical syndrome begin, is often difficult to decide."

Lieutenant Colonel Stephen W Ranson, chief of the US 7th Army Psychiatric Center, agreed. He recalled one soldier telling a surgeon: "I can't stand them shells. My stomach hurts. They tear my stomach to pieces." Ranson reminded the surgeon that these symptoms "merely describe in emotional phraseology one of the normal psychosomatic reaction patterns to battle stress". They were not to be used to diagnose any psychiatric affliction. According to Ranson and other senior officers, it was normal for combatants to suffer muscular tension, freezing, shaking and tremors, excessive perspiration, anorexia, nausea, abdominal distress, diarrhoea, incontinence, abnormal heartbeats, breathlessness, a burning sense of weight oppressing the chest, faintness and giddiness. Combatants had to "learn to live with it".

Traumatised soldiers had many reasons for becoming emotionally ill. In one study published in the *British Medical Journal* in 1946, Eileen M Boone asked 500 hospitalised men why they thought they had broken down. A third said they "could not face the shelling", while one in 10 admitted they had



### The proximity to death

Seeing friends injured or killed at close range was often cited as a cause of psychological distress

**FRIGHTENED  
SOLDIERS EITHER  
FIRED THEIR RIFLES  
WILDLY OR FOUND  
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collapsed after seeing a friend killed or injured. The rest explained that they were exhausted, could no longer "endure horrible sights", had found themselves trapped in vehicles or buried alive, were worried about their families, had been separated from their unit, were afraid of being killed, and were ashamed because they were no longer able to "keep up with the younger men".

Whatever the cause, the symptoms were unmistakable: crying, trembling, disturbed sleep, hypervigilance, flashbacks and an exaggerated startle response. Irrespective of their desire to "carry through", they were in poor physical condition and incapable of coping with their surroundings.

### Bad for morale

Psychological injuries were a serious problem for military commanders. They inhibited aggression, disrupted discipline and overrode more positive emotions such as loyalty to comrades. Frightened soldiers either fired their rifles wildly or found that their hands shook so much they could not load ammunition. Psychiatric casualties were believed to inflict more damage to military morale than physical wounds, which at least might rouse the survivors to renewed acts of aggression against the enemy. In contrast, people who witnessed their comrades giving way to terror were often rendered "ineffective" themselves.



**Signed off** An army doctor marks a soldier's card to say he's been officially diagnosed as suffering from battle exhaustion



**Cross-examination** A US soldier exhibiting symptoms of war neurosis is observed by a team of psychiatrists in December 1942

For this reason, trauma was often described as a "virus": insidious and infectious.

The prevalence of trauma was the chief reason why most armies enlisted the help of psychiatrists during the Second World War. Their role was to improve the ways that the military identified psychologically vulnerable recruits. They were also employed to help design training regimes that would make soldiers more resilient in combat. New recruits had to be "conditioned" to the noise of battle, so that they did not "crack" under combat conditions.

Not everyone was convinced of the value of military psychiatrists. A crude term for them was "pissy Christs". Indeed, many senior officers fretted that the mere presence of psychiatrists would lower morale. There were fears that psychiatric casualties were malingerers or weaklings. These "cowards" needed discipline, not mollycoddling.

Although psychiatrists' attempts at pre-deployment screening generally proved disappointing, their 'PIE' method of front-line psychiatry (proximity to combat, immediacy and expectation of recovery) was more effective. PIE involved deploying psychiatrists near the fighting, treating psychological casualties as close as possible

to the front lines and immediately after evacuation. The psychiatrist would also inform the casualty that they were not only expected to recover but that they would be redeployed to their unit. Nevertheless, levels of breakdown remained high. In 1944, around 20 per cent of all British war casualties and 66 per cent of non-surgical ones were psychiatric.

Despite the crisis, the traumatised men of the Second World War have not generated the same amount of attention as those from the 1914–18 war. This was partly due to an increased awareness that perpetrators of atrocities could also be traumatised. Their sense of shame or recognition of having morally transgressed might trigger psychological pain. Indeed, in postwar Germany, cases of perpetrator-trauma vastly outnumbered those of victim-trauma. But admitting to the sufferings of German troops and civilians risked drawing attention away from the Holocaust and other brutalities.

Narratives of healing might also be inappropriate. Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi recognised this in his essay *The Memory of the Offense*, in which he struggled with the question of how people should write about the "memory of a trauma... inflicted". Levi concluded: "Here, as with other phenomenon, we are dealing with a paradoxical analogy between victim and oppressor, and we are anxious to be clear: both are in the same trap, but it is the oppressor, and he alone, who has prepared it and activated it, and if he suffers from this, it is right that he should suffer."

#### Extreme measures

National differences in responding to the traumas of war emerged. For example, Russian servicemen placed huge emphasis on "sacrifice for the Motherland" and their ability to withstand exceptionally high levels of suffering: resilience was their watchword. In Germany, a different dynamic could be observed. Over the entire war, the German army seems to have experienced relatively low levels of psychiatric breakdown, but this was largely due to its draconian treatment of afflicted men. When faced with an epidemic of battle exhaustion, the Wehrmacht began executing sufferers. Perhaps as many as 15,000 were summarily killed and an unknown number killed themselves.

Although the British army did not execute servicemen for mental breakdowns or desertion during the Second World War, many senior officers thought they should have. In the words of Sir Richard O'Connor, commander of VIII Corps in Normandy: "There were genuine cases of shell shock, but the great majority were merely frightened of

shelling and wanted an excuse to get out of it. The shelling was horrible and most frightening, but if people were allowed to leave the battlefield every time they were frightened, the army would have disintegrated in no time... Horrible as it is, I am in favour of the death penalty in certain cases."

As this suggests, there were social expectations around the way people dealt with trauma. Nationality, ethnicity, class, occupation, gender, life stage and generation all influenced the way soldiers and civilians displayed trauma. Unfortunately, this also meant that many people failed to have their suffering acknowledged. The sufferings of combatants have been emphasised to a much greater extent than that of civilians. The ferocious technologies of modern warfare brought carnage to everyone's doorstep, but there has been a relatively small amount of attention paid to the psychological disorders experienced by civilians caught up in land wars. This is in contrast to the vast literature about civilian responses to aerial bombardment, for example. There is also comparatively little about the trauma experienced by girls and women raped by occupying Axis and Allied soldiers, let alone the psychological suffering of the millions of children who were witnesses to brutality.

No one doubts, however, that the traumatic effects of the Second World War have been underestimated. In recent years, these effects have been evaluated under the term PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). The diagnosis was invented by Abram Kardiner in 1941 to explain the traumatic neuroses of war, but it wasn't until the aftermath of the war in Vietnam that PTSD was admitted into the American Psychiatric Association's third edition of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1980). Since that time, PTSD has become the central lens through which to understand the traumas of combat as well as other 'bad events'. To the shock of many military observers, psychiatrists and other medics were still treating elderly veterans of the Second World War suffering from war-related PTSD five or six decades after the hostilities ended. War trauma turned out to be a lifelong disorder.

At an even more basic level, the trauma of millions of victims has gone unnoticed because they did not survive to tell their story. The dead don't hurt. Trauma is the suffering of survival. As combatant-poet Shawn O'Leary put it, some of the traumatised "mow and gibber like an ape"; for others, "there is no saying and no doing".

**Joanna Bourke** is professor of history at Birkbeck, University of London, and the editor of *War and Art* (Reaktion Books, 2017)



## OPINION

JAMES HOLLAND ON BATTLEFIELD LOGISTICS

# “The western Allies were fighting a multidimensional war”

There is a tendency to want to categorise our history. Who was the most evil person ever? The best monarch? And which was the most decisive

battle of the Second World War? Of course, any answer depends on the criteria according to which such a question is being judged. In the case of battles of the Second World War, Stalingrad, Kursk and the D-Day invasion are the ones most regularly trotted out. Each was certainly a key moment in the war, when a major shift took place – but were they the most decisive? I’m not sure. One major event leads to another, followed by another, and so on. Perhaps the most decisive battle was that fought in Poland in September 1939. After all, it is the fight that would kick off the entire global conflict that was to follow.

I do think, however, that overall we have tended to be too land-centric in our view of the war, and also that we’ve been prone to look at the conflict too simplistically. War is understood to be fought on three levels: strategic, tactical and operational. The strategic level refers to the overall aims, while the tactical is the fighting bit – the coalface of war. It’s the crew in their Lancaster bomber or Sherman tank; it’s the soldiers advancing. It is these two levels that have dominated the narrative, whether on TV or in books. We’ve all seen and read a lot about what the senior commanders were thinking, or what it was like coming under fire from a German machine-gun or crouching in a foxhole during a barrage. What has been conspicuously missing, however, is the operational level, which is the nuts and bolts of war: economics, factories, shipping, maintenance of supply at the front. The operational level is how you achieve your strategic aims; it enables you to enact your much-finessed tactics.

Reinsert the operational level into the narrative and a rather different picture emerges. Germany’s blitz-

krieg years, for example, were characterised by brilliant operational skill, with the panzer spearhead superbly well supplied and so able to maintain the rapid pace that so completely discombobulated its

enemies. Later, in the vast expanse of the Soviet Union, where infrastructure was poor and the distances too great for the Germans to maintain their way of war, they swiftly reached their culmination point – the moment when they could no longer operate in the way they desired. Soon after, the resources stockpiled or stolen – which had proven enough when the war was still being fought on one front – became largely exhausted at the very moment continued conflict grew in scale, complexity and cost. Thereafter, Germany was on a downward curve, which meant that by Stalingrad, Kursk and D-Day, the Third Reich had long reached a point where it could no longer win the war.

Similarly the Japanese, flush with wonderful Zero fighter planes, modern aircraft carriers, dive-bombers and a highly disciplined army, were formidable when fighting on their own terms in 1941–42. Like Germany, however, they swiftly lost out the moment resources ran short and they found themselves fighting a war that was too big and too expensive, and in which the rate of technological advancement was leaving them behind.

The Allies, by contrast – and the western Allies especially – were fighting a multi-dimensional war. “Modern warfare,” said General Sir Harold Alexander in 1943, “is the correlation between the air, the land and the sea. Army, air forces and navy must be a brotherhood operating together.” Armies were needed to take land, air power to help secure this land and to grind down the effectiveness of the enemy, and naval power to ensure supplies could be maintained and to provide delivery of land forces.

Unlike Germany, and to an extent the Soviet Union, the Allies were always operating from across the sea. However, since even the USSR was dependent on US and even British supplies, the Allied victory was ultimately dependent on shipping. This required simply extraordinary levels of operational skill and planning. Organising supplies across the oceans to all corners of the world, which sometimes took months to arrive, was a challenge of astonishing complexity.

Perhaps this means that the battle of the Atlantic was the most decisive of the war. (That epic struggle will feature in the next volume of this bookazine series, *War at Sea*.) Without clear passage from the US to Britain, there could have been no victory over Nazi Germany. And once the Atlantic was won in May 1943, the path to Allied success was clear. ■

James Holland is an author, historian and broadcaster. His latest book is *Normandy '44: D-Day and the Battle for France* (Bantam Press, 2019), which is accompanied by a three-part TV series, available on Amazon Prime



### Line of supply

Allied soldiers unload ammunition from infantry landing crafts on the shores of the Solomon Islands during the Second World War

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Crew members tread carefully along the slanting deck of the aircraft carrier USS *Yorktown* after bomb damage received during the battle of Midway, June 1942

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